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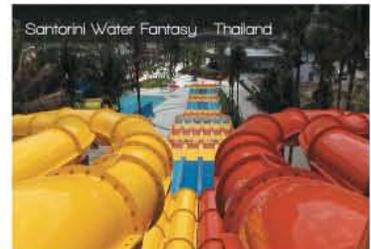
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# in any event...

event planning in today's theme park environment

by Norman Kahn, Utopia Entertainment, Inc.

It's almost universally accepted that events are an important and substantial part of the theme park business. Whether it is the drive to extend the length of stay, grow attendance in shoulder periods, or increase guest satisfaction, events go a long way towards achieving these objectives.

But as theme park professionals, where does one look for inspiration beyond the tried-and-true holiday, Halloween, and the summer festival events that are already successful? In our experience designing and producing attractions and events for theme parks, cities, local governments, corporations and nonprofits, we have had to come up with a solution that makes sense for our clients in all of these sectors.

We have found that it's most effective to use a "framework" for evaluating where to apply your event dollars. We have developed a three-part system that provides a useful blueprint for event planning in the theme park environment: Create, Enhance, Support.

Bring this strategy into play when evaluating your annual portfolio of special events. Create: search high and low for new concepts that can be brought to your park and your guests. Enhance: take what is working and improve upon it. Support: seek out and find opportunities to take over or cooperate with existing events that are local favorites and incorporate them into your park calendar.

Here are some relevant examples of how we deploy this strategy for our clients:

**1) Create new events.** We have searched the world for new ideas and inspiration - from art events such as "Art Basel" and Santa Monica's "Glow" to car events like the world's best "Concourse'D Elegance." You would be amazed at what you will find out there, and better yet who is willing to help bring that concept alive at your park. Licensing an event concept, hosting, or even co-producing a version of a "World Famous" or "Guinness world-record setting" event can also be a great way to bring in some excellent entertainment and publicity value.

Bringing in celebrations from other cultures and other parts of the world is another way to introduce new events, and can also allow you to reach a new audience you may not be currently serving. Events like Cinco De Mayo, Rio Carnivale, Chinese New Year, and other ethnic and cultural festivals provide a great resource for new event concepts.

**2) Enhance existing events.** Never stop investing in what is working and expanding to make it the best that it can be. If your Halloween event is working well, endeavor to grow it and use that momentum to continue to enhance the experience you give your customers. We recently took an annual Halloween event from a few thousand visitors to over 14,000 by constantly adding and improving the event over time.

**3) Support existing events.** Find local events that can be incorporated into your park and support them. Pave the way for them to come and have their event at your park. These types of events can be found at cultural gatherings and festivals, youth sports meets, cooking contests, parade and dance competitions and so on. You may not be able to afford to create a Ferrari Club Concourse'D Elegance, but the local vintage car club, combined with some support from you and your venue, could hit a chord with your current market and become an annual event that eventually drives new guests to your gates.

The answer is amazingly close to you: look local. Look at what is popular and important to the community your business serves. I realize that a great deal of theme park business is tourist driven, but my experience in event design and production is that "if the locals will like it, the tourists will love it." And the local celebrations and attractions of your geographical area can prove to be a powerful enhancement to your event planning success.

Applying this framework to evaluate your next steps in event planning will serve you well in incorporating new, exciting, and profitable events into your theme park business. As simple as it sounds, many more theme parks could benefit from applying this disciplined approach to evaluating event opportunities.

Keep applying the strategy and be diligent about taking a "top to bottom" look at your Event Calendar on a regular basis so you stay at the leading edge of creating great event experiences for your guests.

**"If your Halloween event is working well, endeavor to grow it and use that momentum to continue to enhance the experience you give your customers." Photo courtesy Utopia Entertainment**



Norman Kahn is an award winning producer who has spent over two decades designing, producing and operating large scale attractions and events for theme parks and special venues for clients including Universal Studios, Warner Bros., Paramount Parks, and Six Flags. He is CEO of Utopia Entertainment located in Los Angeles, California.

