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COOPERATION; THE MISSING INGREDIENT

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ABSTRACT

Cooperation is an important element to achieving success in special event planning. It must be structured to provide maximum impact from the community. Diversity of ideas provides for a foundation that will create involvement and a feeling of ownership.

COOPERATION; THE MISSING INGREDIENT

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

In the early planning stages of the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition, nearly all organizations around New Orleans were told to either "keep a low profile" or "not to worry, we've got it under control."

So, when the initial query phone calls came to The Chamber/New Orleans and the River Region asking one of two questions--(a) Is there a World's Fair in New Orleans during 1984? or (b) Will the World's Fair open on time--we answered yes to both.

For months we handled requests for information as best we could with the limited amount of literature that we had. Requests started coming in from news media across the country. Naturally, we would refer them to the World's Fair marketing and public relations departments. A few days later the same news media people would call back and ask for the same material again. It seemed that no one at the Fair was responding to their requests. Finally, we would send someone over to the Fair to physically collect as much material as we could and then we would mail it at our expense.

Public relations and marketing professionals from throughout the city and region would have welcomed an opportunity to consult and work with the Fair on its promotional efforts. But the staff and management

of the Louisiana World Exposition, Inc. (LWE) remained tight-lipped and proceeded with their plans to construct and promote a "\$450 million extravaganza in New Orleans."

Approximately three months before the Fair opened advertisements appeared in several national magazines including, Time, Newsweek, Better Homes and Gardens, etc. Because the Fair was behind in its construction, the advertisements had to rely solely on New Orleans as its selling point.

Still no cooperation had been developed between the community-at-large and LWE. Costs were escalating quietly and quickly. Almost overnight, Fair officials ran to the State Legislature proclaiming that \$10 million was needed desperately in order to finish the Fair on time. After some debate, the loan was granted.

Rumors began circulating again. Items such as, "Well if they were going to have a Fair, they surely won't have one now," began to surface. Calls continued to come in. People were naturally anxious about their vacation plans. Many people still believed that the Fair would be cancelled. And still the official line remained, "No problem, we've got it under control."

Approximately two weeks before the Fair was scheduled to open, calls were placed to public relations and marketing professionals from a diverse cross-section of the community. Turnout at the first meeting of the Fair's "P.R. Pros" was phenomenal. Approximately 70 professionals attended the meeting to learn and participate in "Media Day."

Media Day was designed to give visiting journalists an advance look at the "World's Fair behind the mermaid gates." It turned out to be a disaster. One critic remarked that Media Day was like "throwing a party and then having your guest of honor show up while you're still in the bathtub." Journalists dodged dump trucks. Camera crews zeroed in on Orleans Parish inmates, dressed in prison fatigues, who were brought in to help clean the Fair site. The gigantic Ferris Wheel stood sparse and cartless. In a word, the pace was in complete disarray.

The next day the news reports were skeptical to say the least. Headlines read "Fair Not Quite Ready," and "Pavilions Incomplete." Again, the natural response from across the country, "Will there be a Fair in New Orleans in 1984?"

Following a glorious opening day in which nearly 90,000 people visited the Fair, attendance fell to pitifully low levels. With the high salary level coupled with unpaid construction costs and the low attendance, it wasn't long before the Fair was back at the State Legislature asking for an additional \$17.5 million bailout.

Now the questions about the Fair seemed almost moot. The people around the country either (a) had no earthy idea there was a World's Fair in New Orleans or (b) if they did know about it, they were convinced that it would shut down any day. And with each new twist of the negative publicity knife, attendance fell and the losses mounted.

The first marketing director was fired during the second month of

the Fair. The new marketing director believed in cooperation--cooperation throughout the southeast--the trouble was, he had no money to cooperate with. Consequently, everything was done on a shoestring.

But attendance began to creep upward and, with the cutbacks in manpower, the Fair was able to dogpaddle in a sea of financial misfortunes.

FUTURE

With the full benefit of hindsight, I make the following assertions:

1. First, and foremost, the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition, once it was fully created, was an aesthetic wonder. From concept to actual construction, it was a beautiful theme park from end to end. It relied heavily on regional flavor with international pockets thrown in for good measure. Nearly 95% of the people surveyed said that they had had a great time at the Fair and that they would recommend it to their friends.

2. Develop a spirit of cooperation with the community in the planning stages. When a community-wide project is about to be undertaken, keep everyone in the community as informed as possible. Tell people about the problems, communicate with them. Develop and implement an adequate grapevine system where factual details are close at hand. Don't arrogantly proclaim that everything is under control in a \$450 million project which is more of a community event, rather than a privately-owned business. (And a six-month event at that.) It is imperative that rapport is developed with business leaders within the community, so that everyone feels as though they are part of the project.

3. Examine if you're community is really ready for a World's Fair (or any major event). From 1972 through 1992, there will have been a total of five, and possibly six, World's Fairs. World's Fairs are now resembling over blown state fairs. Call in 12 countries, put a few rides around the perimeter and name it a World's Fair.

Ask the questions: "Is this really an economic development tool used to revitalize some portion of our downtown urban area?" "Do we have enough community support to pull this sort of venture off?" "Will there be enough response, considering the number of attractions worldwide?"

4. Climate. One of the factors blamed for the low attendance at the New Orleans Fair was the infamous reputation of New Orleans summer weather. A mixture of mosquitoes and high humidity made many people think twice about attending the Fair during the summer. Chicago, which had previously discussed the possibility of holding a year-long fair, finally came to the logical conclusion that not everyone wants to spend their vacation in a blustery Chicago winter. Closely examine your scheduling.

5. Economy. Attendance was down in domestic theme parks across the country. Even the 1984 Summer Olympics suffered from sluggish attendance during the first week of contests. Many people cited the strong dollar

overseas. Domestic travel was down and international travel was way up.

Also, look to see if you're event is too costly for local residents to go time and time again. Local support forms the base of a successful event. Look at your pricing structure. Encourage people to buy season passes early. Inform them and keep them informed.

6. Construction. Everything should start on time and end on time. Start early enough and plan so that everything is perfectly clean and operating efficiently the day you open. Don't have prison crews picking up chicken bones while the press is around. Have your site ready so that you can market what's there. Because, of course, you can't market what's not there!

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition will leave a renovated warehouse district, a state-of-the-art transportation system, a huge convention center, new and improved city streets and sidewalks and a few functional buildings. But it will also leave broken hearts, dreams and businesses.

The 1984 Fair was a bold, major stroke of genius which wasn't controlled. Because it wasn't controlled it careened like a runaway automobile. Seven million people came to New Orleans and the Fair. The problem was, the Fair was built to accomodate a crowd of twelve million.

Time will tell who won and who lost. But one thing is for certain--cooperation was the missing ingredient.