

special guest

how live entertainment can set you apart from everything else

by Norman Kahn

In this world of countless entertainment options, there are so many things competing for the guest entertainment dollar that it is easy to get overwhelmed with how your attraction can set itself apart from the rest of the pack. Whether it is video games, the internet, DVDs and Home Theater, the world of entertainment options is creating what we call a "cocooning" environment for people who have unlimited entertainment options to enjoy from their home. When you couple that with the rising cost of getting out of the house and experiencing something beyond the "cocoon" it is easy to see why the competition for the entertainment dollar is so fierce. Theme Parks and Live Attractions have a distinct challenge in creating an experience that can not only compete with these options, but can far surpass what these home entertainment options have to offer. One of the ways to achieve this is through an effective Live Entertainment Program that hits on all cylinders, giving the guest the opportunity to experience things they can never get in the comfort of their own home.

Now let's face it. There is a great deal of interactivity on the internet, video games, and even now in the newest form of home DVD's, the BluRay Disc. But I argue that one of the things that seems to be missing in all of this is "connectivity". The joy of enjoying a shared experience with your family and friends, and in having a real life human connection with a character, musician, or other type of entertainer, is something that you will never be able to find at home. So many parks and attractions are focused on the next big ride or attraction, that they lose sight on the importance of this very established fact. Some of the smallest entertainment investments yield the largest returns. Now granted, many live entertainment investments don't "drive the gate", as we in the industry would say. But that is not to say they can't. I think the point here is that whether entertainment drives the gate or not, one thing is clear, it certainly distinguishes your facility from the myriad of other entertainment options that are out there, and also adds a layer of warmth and enjoyment to your guest experience that nothing else can.

Now there are many ways in which to do this, and most large theme parks have mastered all of the techniques. But perhaps a consideration of the following options may prove helpful to any operator who is looking to improve guest satisfaction scores, and help improve return visitation and guest spend. Consider these three ideas:

Character Program – Most parks have some sort of park mascot or branded character that they associate their marketing efforts with. And it is natural to have a costumed character in the park to help reinforce this. But many other options exist to further enhance this experience. Character Meals and Photo Opportunities are common examples of an enhanced character program, but other ideas include giving your character a home base from which to operate, whether it is at the front entrance of the park or located in a specific attraction queue area, or merchandise facility. In fact, placing your character photo opportunity near or in a merchandise facility is a proven way to increase foot traffic into the store, thereby not only serving as a entertainment enhancement but as a revenue driver. Be sure to promote the times that this will occur and you are sure to see people lining up for the meet and greet opportunity as well as spending their idle time shopping in your store. Another great idea is to give your character (or his handler) a custom vehicle, in which to travel through your park. This puts the character in front of more eyes during the operating day, but has a dual purpose in the sense that is also gives you a fantastic vehicle to promote the park during outside events such as parades, field trips, or other marketing initiatives. Don't have enough money or room for a parade? How about a vehicle "cavalcade"? Get two or three vehicles and the characters together and make a mini show out of it. This is a small technique, that once again, if promoted properly as to time and place of presentation, and perhaps ending at your exit retail, or another store, can serve the triple purpose of enhancing the guest experience, providing a no-wait entertainment experience for guests that happen upon it, and lastly promoting traffic in your retail or food venue.

Celebrations – It is obvious to celebrate the annual anniversary of your park, or the



Despereaux, star character from Universal Pictures' *The Tale of Despereaux* makes an appearance for the holidays at the Universal Orlando Resort. Photo courtesy of Universal Orlando.



BE OUR GUEST: Wearing their familiar plaid waistcoats, Walt Disney World V.I.P. Tour Guides (L-R): Danielle Warner, Laurie Sintay Fox and Les Tsui pose with Mickey Mouse in front of Cinderella Castle at the Magic Kingdom. Disney VIP Tour Services offers personalized tours for guests looking for their perfect Walt Disney World Resort vacation. (Gene Duncan, photographer) © 2009, Disney

opening of a new attraction, but what about something that is more timely and important to your guest. It could be their Birthday, their Anniversary, their First Visit to your park, or they could be the "special" guest of the day. Whatever you choose, creating a reason to celebrate, and making the guest the special focal point of it can have tremendous returns, both in terms of guest satisfaction and return visitation. When you think about it, they are not the only ones celebrating, and chances are the rest of the people in their party are going

to have a supercharged experience. Add in those guests that see this celebration going on, and the enjoyment they will derive from the positive joy it creates and this low cost investment in enhancing the entertainment experience pays big dividends. Many ways exist to celebrate, but some of the ways you can include live entertainment into the mix is to provide the guest with a backstage visit, or onstage mention during one of your existing shows. You can also have a meet-and-greet with the entertainers after the show where



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pictures and autographs can be given. You can also give them a special seat at the show, a special meal in one of your food venues, or some special merchandise at one of your stores. Anyway you handle it, it will improve the guest experience and differentiate you from the other faceless unconnected entertainment options elsewhere.

VIP Experience – Now everyone wants to feel special. Disney and Universal have mastered the art of the VIP tour or backstage experience, but there are many ways any facility can implement this type of program and the payoff can be huge. Creating a VIP experience that consists of more than line passes and special treatment is easier than you might think, and the use of live entertainment is one way to really enhance the experience without creating an overly burdensome operational requirement or excessive costs. The power of a

personal performance, even if it is a magician, juggler, or character performer giving a one on one interaction, the special mention of a guest in a musical performance, or the inclusion of their favorite song into a live show, can really connect in ways that nothing else can. This type of special treatment is very easy to offer, and yet is so often left out of the program. It is certainly one way to create a memorable experience that your guests will never forget.

Now much of this may seem obvious, but you would be surprised how many parks don't take advantage of these opportunities. Whether it is leveraging your entertainment in your merchandise facilities, or making a special experience for guest with the resources you already have, all of these techniques serve the dual purpose of increasing guest satisfaction and revenues. Give them a try and see the results. And always remember, Live

Entertainment is something that your guest cannot get at home, and the power of the shared experience with family, friends, and even complete strangers, in the theme park environment is what sets you apart from the world of entertainment options that are out there. You have something special to offer, so make something special out of it.

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Norman Kahn is an award winning producer who has spent over two decades designing, producing and operating large scale attractions 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.

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