

## Dealing with the Impact of the Gulf Disaster

As of press time, millions of gallons of oil continue to leak into the Gulf of Mexico from the extraordinary BP rig explosion that occurred on April 20th of this year. What some officials (including Carol Browner, the head of the EPA) are terming one of America's worst environmental disasters ever continues to kill fish and other types of sea life as well as non-sea creatures as the oil creeps toward the U.S. mainland.

In addition to this loss of wildlife, the oil spill is also causing another type of deadly effect as numerous Gulf Coast festivals are cancelling their 2010 events. From the 40th annual International Billfish Tournament to 63rd annual Golden Meadow-Fourchon International Tarpon Rodeo, a wide variety of these festivals are discovering that they cannot hold their events this year with large swaths of the Gulf now closed to fishing and other marine activities.

While many festivals have contingency plans for weather problems such as storms, snow, or other natural disasters, by their very nature, those types of events generally come and go. This often allows for a fairly quick rescheduling. The challenge with the oil spill is that, even when BP eventually stops the leak, the oil slick remnants of the disaster could linger for months, if not years.

As a result, simply postponing your festival to an alternate date might not work in this situation. Instead, a festival centered on the vibrant water culture of the Gulf Coast could face continued threats to its viability well into the future.

Which means that other options may be needed in order to recover the lost revenue that your event may be facing.

Fortunately, several exist, though they vary in terms of how quickly they can be realized. For this month's Current Events column, we've highlighted three options to consider. Remember, these are not the only ones and, with a challenge as grave as the oil spill disaster, any affected event planner should muster all their creative juices to address the problem from every possible angle.

### #1 Check Your Insurance Policies

In the past, Current Events has commented on the importance of Event Cancellation or Postponement Insurance. If you have this type of insurance and your event has been delayed because of the oil spill, checking with your insurer should be one of your first steps—sometimes even before you cancel the event.

In particular, ask your agent what specific steps you need to take in order to recover under the policy. Following these steps very carefully can minimize the chance that your insurer will deny your claim.

Be forewarned though: some policies contain clauses that craft exceptions for certain problems. While an oil spill may not seem like a Force Majeure or Act of God event that is sometimes limited or excluded from coverage, any time you are dealing with a natural disaster such as oil leaking from the seabed, you should be prepared for anything. In addition, the possibility that your policy places restrictions on disasters resulting from negligent or criminal acts of others could exist.

All of this means that, if you are considering making an insurance claim, before you make any major decisions, check with your policy on what, when, where and how certain events may or may not be covered. A little of this advance research could save you a lot of time in the long run.

### #2 Seek Government Relief

For the last several weeks, Current Events has been calling various federal, state, and local departments about whether programs are in place to assist festivals that have been cancelled because of the oil spill.

To date, we have not received confirmation of a specific program but have received a variety of assurances that, especially in Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida, the federal and state governments are formulating plans to assist a wide variety of affected industries, including the tourism and special events segments.

Unfortunately, as of press time, we can't confirm a specific program. However, based on these conversations, a good bet is to start with your local chamber of commerce and your elected officials to inquire what state and federal funds might be available. Other government departments that could get involved include state tourism offices.

While this might sound like a "shot in the dark" approach, there is good reason to believe that federal and state entities will begin to identify programs for monetary assistance whether it's in the form of grants or low-cost loans.

### #3 Seek Relief from BP and Other Corporations Involved in the Oil Spill

Unlike a true natural disaster, the oil spill was the result of human failure as much as Mother Nature. While the various corporations such as BP and Transocean involved in the oil spill continue to argue over who is at fault, several festival planners aren't waiting for the government or the courts to make that final determination. Instead, they are considering going straight to the companies and ask for monetary relief because of their event cancellation.

Indeed, in a recent news report, Golden Meadow-Fourchon Tarpon Rodeo's President John Maurer explained that his team was looking into approaching BP to

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help cover expenses for their cancellation.

This is actually not a bad idea at all, especially for those events involving sea life such as fishing festivals and tournaments. Now, to be sure, BP and other corporations would certainly not admit any responsibility at this stage for a festival cancellation or postponement.

However, with their corporate images taking a huge beating in the press, it would not be a surprise if the companies considered some type of contribution under the guise of "community support" or other P.R. angle.

This tactic could be particularly compelling if revenue from your event is used for charitable purposes such as scholarships or other Gulf Coast causes. Granted, this strategy is by no means a guaranteed winner. Yet, the old adage of "it never hurts to ask" holds incredibly true in this instance.

One suggestion though: if you decide to approach one of these corporations, don't position it in any way as a legal threat in the initial stage. While the time may come when your event could seek legal relief from BP and others, at this point, treat your request as you would another solicitation of support. Reach out to the same corporate department as you would if you were simply asking them for a sponsorship or other contribution.

This approach could keep the legal types out of the decision-making and leave it in the hands of the public relations people. In a situation such as this one where these companies could face millions, if not billions, of dollars in lawsuit costs, the last thing you want to do early on is find your request stuck in the purgatory of legal review.

Springfield has employed 275 people. Most of these have been temporary employees that have been hired to work during Bright Nights at Forest Park. The administrative staff started with one full-time and one part-time employee, and at its largest there were five full-time and one part-time member on the staff.

Today, the staff still consists of the original two and one additional employee with a contracted accountant. These four individuals have been able to provide quality entertainment for the community and have been increasing the entertainment value of Bright Nights at Forest Park with more interactive opportunities during the event – Visits with Santa, Supper with Santa, horse-drawn wagon and carriage rides, Bright Nights Express, Bright Nights Road Race, Dinner with Dickens, Craft Nights, outdoor skating, shopping and snacks.

Leading the Spirit of Springfield since prior to its founding is Judith A. Matt, President Judy has more than 40 years of experience in special event planning, marketing and communications. One of her secrets to success to get as many people involved as possible. "It is important to make them feel a part of the project so that they take ownership," noted Judy. She added that this also helps to carry the message long before Facebook and Twitter. She is creative and has the tenacity to get the job done.

She has been supported since very early in 1990 by Amy J. Barron-Burke who serves as Vice President. Amy and Judy met while Amy was interning for the City of Springfield. Amy began part time, but as the need grew so did her hours and her responsibilities for event logistics and marketing. "My first day as an intern with Judy was a 12 hour day when a Springfield Mayor, who is now a U. S. Congressman, was inaugurated for a second term. It served as an indicator of what was to come," Amy said. She writes the media releases and makes sure the tents are in the right places.

Another intern turned staff member is Kristen Anderson. An intern from the University of Massachusetts – Amherst in the summer of 2007, Kristen joined the staff as the Program Coordinator after graduation in 2008. Her responsibilities continue to grow as does her career. She provides administrative and logistical support. She oversees many activities and group tour marketing for Bright Nights at Forest Park representing the Spirit of Springfield at the American Bus Association Marketing Place. "I like the interaction with people," Kristen said.

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Miraculously, through our determined effort, we ended up having everything we needed and had the biggest festival in our history, with record attendance of 30,000 in two days. I am so very, very pleased with the way it turned out.

### What do you do to relax?

I am most relaxed and have a great time attending events planned by other people or organizations. I enjoy the time off, and especially the camaraderie of being with event professionals without working!

Believe it or not, I like to do work to relax. When I'm able to catch up on my emails in the evenings and weekends so that I don't have as much of that to do during the week, it helps me feel more grounded and in control about what goes on when I'm actually in the day-to-day swing of things at the office. Otherwise, travelling and reading are my two main passions. A former resident of central Europe, with a working knowledge of Spanish, I enjoy flexing my passport muscle most!

### What is the best advice you've ever received?

"You shouldn't manage someone whose job you haven't done or that you don't understand."

Before I ask someone else to do something, I will have done it myself so that I know what goes into it and how to manage that person more effectively.

### Personal Philosophy

Don't be dependent on anyone. Be self-reliant as much as possible. We each have to strengthen and develop ourselves through our own efforts and cannot wait for anyone to walk our paths first.