

SISTER FESTIVALS: THE CONCEPT AND BENEFITS

by Daniel Baldacci, President, IFEA Latin America



I was fifteen years old when I left São Paulo, Brazil, to study in Michigan, USA, through an internship program called Youth for Understanding. The experience was great but short, lasting only six months, so I signed up again and returned at age seventeen to graduate in California.

More than improving my English, these exchanges gave me the opportunity to experience another culture and a new way of life, living with families that I adopted as if they were my own, although I had never seen them previously. After that, my parents also welcomed several students from other countries to Brazil and since then I have been a fan of exchange programs because they presuppose a partnership for improving both sides, not with money, but with what each one has to offer for the betterment of the other.

However, in the festival industry, except for some occasional initiatives, the practice of exchange is still little exercised. We are still at the point where the most common way of getting new ideas is by

traveling, spying, copying, and trying to adapt ideas, solutions, and attractions into our own festivals.

This is the usual way of “exchange,” but the scope and the results, while they don’t end in disappointment, are not always what was expected. Why? Because simply visiting a festival, reading a book, or attending a lecture is not enough to guarantee the success of adopting the ideas found there. We always spend more time and money than expected, not to mention stumbling on the rocks along our way, the obstacles that nobody taught us how to avoid.

With this in mind, in 2005, at the IFEA Convention in San Antonio, I first introduced the concept of “Sister Festivals,” a program that could stimulate and facili-

tate the exchange of ideas, resources, volunteers, professionals, media, attractions, and expertise among events worldwide.

Over the years, IFEA World and its global affiliates and members have offered exchange opportunities through various *Behind the Scenes* programs, and IFEA affiliates in Latin America, Korea, China, Ireland, and Africa have signed Memos of Understanding, basically committing to working cooperatively with each other.

However, despite the increasing number of such initiatives promoted by IFEA’s global affiliates, they are not enough to meet the growing demand from hundreds or thousands of events everywhere seeking exchange opportunities to help improve their activities.

So again, in 2010, during the Industry Compass panel moderated by Charlotte DeWitt at the IFEA's 55th Annual Convention & Expo in Saint Louis, MO (USA), I re-introduced the idea, which was approved by those participating in the group. As a result and as requested, IFEA World has created the new affinity group on its LinkedIn page, called IFEA SISTER FESTIVALS EXCHANGE PROGRAM.

It is the first step to gather festivals and events that wish to establish partnerships and exchange opportunities with similar events around the world, including ideas, volunteers, professionals, media, or even performers and attractions.

OK, now the program exists, so events like yours can take advantage of it. Join the group, read the benefits and tips below, and make your way to success with your future *Sister Event*. Good Luck!

The Sister Festivals Benefits & Tips

Here are some examples of possible benefits you can get with a Sister Festival partnership, once you provide comparable opportunities for your partner event.

1 Media & Communication Exchange
Your event could be announced as a "Sister Event" for free in all communications and advertising of its sister events, such as press releases, folders, posters, advertisements, and internet, especially social media and the official website. In return, you would do the same for them at your event and that, in addition to not costing you anything, could lend more prestige to your festival.

2 Exhibit and Promotion Exchange
Imagine your event being showcased at other major festivals worldwide, just by giving them in return, the same exposure at your own event. It doesn't cost much for you to set up one more kiosk, stand, or booth in your event, but having one at each sister event to show your festival to their visitors is priceless.

A promotional example? You could send the "queen" of your festival to be an attraction at your exhibit at the sister event. There she would be welcomed by the other festival's queen in a festive meeting that catches the attention of the visitors and the media regarding your event: *Which festival does she come from?* While she is there promoting your festival, you could get spontaneous media and comments worldwide in YouTube, blogs, etc. As an alternative, you could exchange official character mascots with the other festival, interjecting a bit of humor in the process.

3 Attractions Exchange & New Sponsorship Opportunities
Festivals and events need to be constantly improved with new elements, such as performers, attractions, or sub-events. There is nothing better than adding an international element with unique features to attract more visitors and sponsors. The best, easiest, and least expensive way may be by sharing attractions and ideas with your sister festivals. You would send an attraction or performers to them, and they would do the same for you. Parades and Mardi Gras-style carnivals often do this, sending parade floats or marching bands to appear at sister events.

In addition, many cities, regions, and countries desire to show their cultural richness in other nations, and your event may be a good vehicle for that. Depending on the attendance and media of your event, you may find support and even sponsorship in the other country.

However, to take advantage of this, there is a long way to go. If you need to convince authorities and producers of another country to support you in any manner or find sponsors, there is nobody better than your sister event to be your representative.

4 Expertise and Know-how Exchange
Sister festivals may provide Behind-the-Scenes, backstage-tours, seminars, webinars, or specific lectures to share expertise that will improve each other's event. In the bargain, participants get free advice and solutions for planning, creating new events, logistics, management, internet and social media, security, set-up, insurance, sponsorship, advertising, promotions, sales, exhibitions, training and other common issues.

5 Volunteers and Internship Exchange
When sister festivals provide housing similar to that in the exchange students' programs, they will be able to share strategic help from international volunteers and other internal staff who had an outstanding experience at the sister event.

6 Multiply the Benefits
You may multiply the benefits by having partnership relations with several sister events simultaneously. There are no quantity limits on this. In fact, this can be useful because different events have different strengths and features that you may want to add or share.

But remember: quality first, then quantity. So, in this case, the limit is how many smooth partnerships you can handle without letting your partners become upset, feeling abandoned by you, no matter the reason: lack of time, staff, money, or other priorities.

7 Look Afar
Your next groundbreaking attraction might come from a sister festival located on the other side of the globe. So do not consider distance as a barrier, neither the language. My experience with China, Korea, and their amazing festivals shows that the costs and complexity due to these factors are nothing, compared with the benefits of a successful exchange experience.

8 Don't Search Only for Famous "Sisters"
Becoming associated with a famous event is always good, no doubt. However, this doesn't mean that an event of which you've never heard is not a good sister to your event-- not to mention that sometimes a foreign festival, unknown to you, may be unique or more successful in its own country than its competitor, from the same region, which is well-known abroad.

9 They Don't Have to Be All International
You may collaborate with national events in the same fashion as with international sister events. While the international element can add some unique cultural features to your festival, national ones may share solutions to challenges that you only face in your own country.

10 Join IFEA and its Sister Festivals Program.
Joining the IFEA is the fastest and easiest way to find your sister festival and establish a successful exchange partnership, among the many festival and event professionals and members worldwide.

Go to the IFEA World LinkedIn page, join the group "IFEA SISTER FESTIVALS EXCHANGE PROGRAM," and write a post about your event and the type of partnership that you either offer or would like to find. Also, contact IFEA global affiliates for suggestions in all regions: Latin America, Asia, Europe, North America, Australia, Africa, and Middle East. Let them know what you are seeking and they will be pleased to help you in the process.

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