

WEATHER

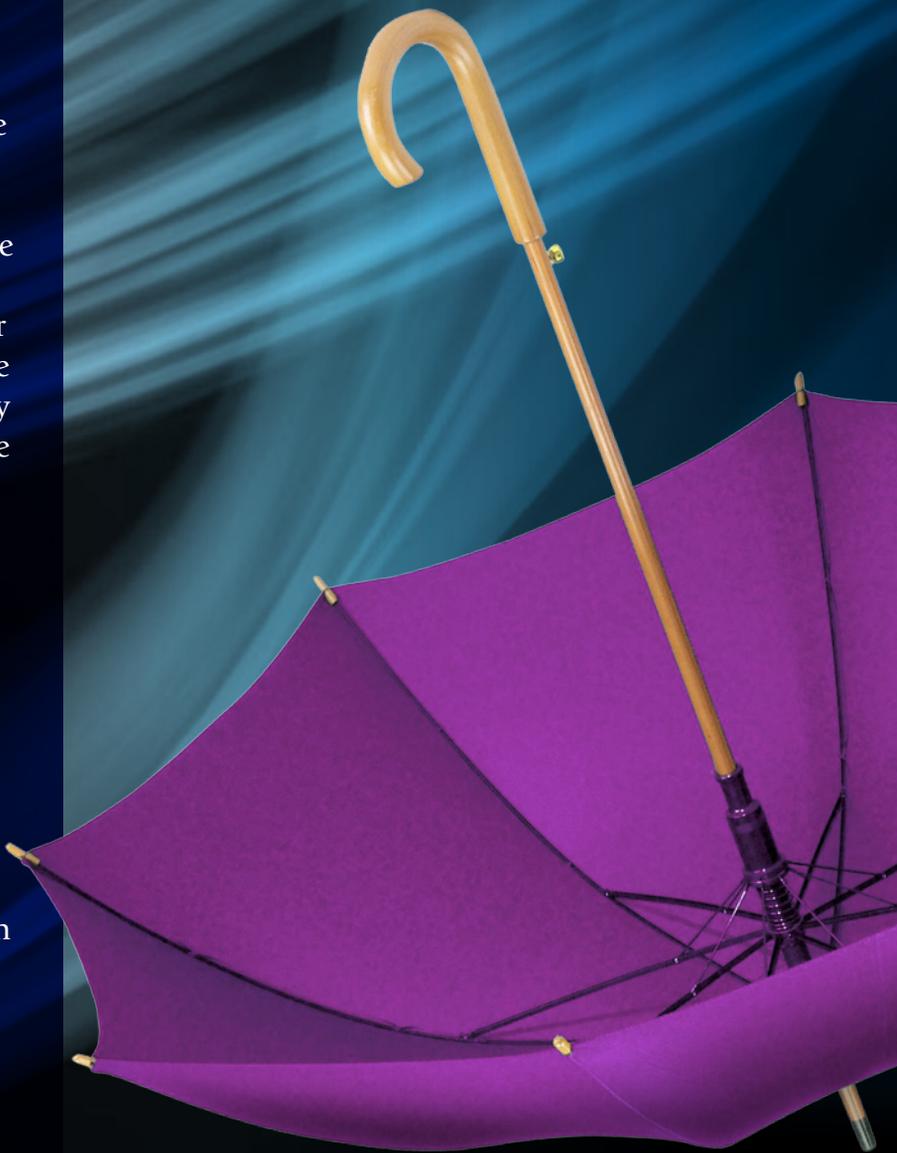
The Most Important Thing...

By Wayne Mahar

But....

Security, traffic detail and cleaning crews are all important considerations for events and festivals. Sure, they cost money, but there is no question, you have to have them. Arguably however, when thinking about the success of an outdoor festival or event, the one element that is generally thought of first and foremost as the key to event attendance and overall success, is the last thing most would think of spending money on. I'm talking about the weather!

This article is a continuation of my article written for the September, 2011 issue of "i.e." magazine entitled "Does the Weather Drive You Crazy?" Since writing that article eight months ago, I've had the opportunity to attend two major event conventions, the IFEA's 56th Annual Convention & Expo in Fort Worth, Texas and more recently, the Festivals and Events Ontario Annual Convention in Niagara Falls, Canada. At both conventions, I was the weather expert on Crisis Management panels, special group sessions put together to discuss a variety of issues that can and do affect outdoor events and concerts. These Crisis Management sessions were well attended, and the main topic of discussion was the weather! Really not surprising considering the tough year 2011 was, with major weather events at the Indianapolis State Fair, the Ottawa Bluesfest and at the Belgium Pukkelpop music festival.



In each of these three events, the same thing happened. Strong winds blew the stage or parts of the stage down. What was different at each event however were the circumstances leading up to the collapse. At the Indiana State Fair, thunderstorms were in the forecast, but there remains much debate about who was at fault, everybody from the Fair itself to the stage manager to the headlining group, Sugarland, who was about to go on stage.

In Ottawa, the storm was, by most accounts, more sudden but there were warnings posted by Environment Canada, the government weather service, roughly 45 minutes to an hour before hand.

Finally, reading accounts of the Belgium incident, it appears there was little or no warning of that storm.

Yes, every incident is a little different. Unfortunately however, the troublesome issues remain essentially the same, all seeming to revolve around a lack of definitive weather protocol and some lack of communication. What I mean by weather protocol is taking weather more seriously and knowing what to do. If you have a huge event that draws tens of thousands of people and you are in an area where thunderstorms and even severe weather typically occur, you have to ask yourself "am I doing everything I can about the weather and the safety of patrons, workers and performers?"

Maybe you need to rethink your weather commitment and approach. Maybe you ought to consider having your own professional meteorologist for your fair or festival. The meteorologist doesn't necessarily have to be on site, but does have to

be familiar with the exact location of your event including topography and other local elements that can change local climates. As I stated in my original article, government weather services do a good job at providing generalized weather information for large areas, but are not meant to do specific, detailed forecasting for specific sites or events.

More importantly, they also are not required to call you if and when they see severe weather developing that could be heading your way. If you are lucky enough to know somebody at the government weather service, you might be fortunate enough for a little "special attention," but usually not. It's just not their job to provide personalized forecasts to a specific event.

Communication, or more accurately the lack of it, is a major issue in severe weather planning. At both Crisis Management seminars I was a panelist on, few had a definite severe weather plan. A definite severe weather plan encompasses everything from things you can do with the stage when the winds pick up to make it less vulnerable, to something as simple as who is in charge? Who is the "go to" person, the decision maker to delay or call off the show? Who can order an act shut down and people to evacuate? Is it the Fair officials? The Stage Manager? The Band Manager? Law enforcement? This seems almost like a "no-brainer" type of question, but having been on these two Crises Management panels, whether it's the U.S., Canada or elsewhere, this is actually far from a no-brainer question.

This needs to be nailed down and agreed on before your fair or event begins! Someone must be in charge of weather and someone must be in charge of making a critical decision like delaying an event or concert, telling patrons to seek shelter (and where), and knowing how to most quickly "spread the word" at the concert or event. You might have a handful of people reviewing the information coming in, but you should have one and only one person responsible for making the final call! In severe weather situations, there is generally little time for debate.

Communication: another element that may seem like a no-brainer at the outset, but usually is not. Once whoever the decision maker is, makes the call for action, do you have your other key people ready to roll and in-the-know on what to do? In all likelihood, you'll be using your cell phone to alert your managers and key people of the decision, but how are you alerting the 15,000 people at your event? You may say "that's easy, I'm getting on the loudspeaker!" If we're talking about 15,000 people in the grandstand at a concert, then a loudspeaker may work just fine. But, what if it were 15,000 people or more at a day long festival spread out over a large area? Do the loudspeakers cover the entire festival area? Should these announcements on loud-

speaker be backed up by law enforcement, staff and volunteers driving the grounds also making the announcement and helping patrons that may need assistance?

And the fun isn't over yet! How long before the storm hits? How fast can you move 15,000 people out of harm's way? Do you/they have time to reach their vehicles in the parking lot or public transportation, or is this a rapidly developing weather event that requires your patrons head to a place of safety immediately? And, if so, where are they headed to? Have you planned in advance what buildings visitors will be ushered in to? Is the building itself the safest and wisest choice?

Once the storm has passed, you can relax some, but not completely. What if you did get hit and there is substantial damage on the grounds? Maybe you have electrical wires down. Patrons, workers and volunteers still on the grounds still need direction. Your inner circle of key people and your communication set up are still needed. Chances are your key people and volunteers will now have to communicate and work with law enforcement, fire, paramedics and other emergency personnel to settle things down, not to mention account for people.

This all sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? It is! But it's ten times better to get these issues resolved before your event begins rather than after, whether any bad weather hits or not. Once the fair or concert begins, you're busy doing dozens of other things, as is everyone else.

Weather forecasting will never be 100% accurate. There will be times strong winds and storms will sneak up on your event with little or no notice. Having your own meteorologist on staff, even on site, monitoring and working for you will only lessen the chance you get caught off guard by a storm. Considering the events of 2011, the question you must ask yourself is "if weather is this important, am I doing all I can?"

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