

by Matt Cranford



While it is important to have great first and last impressions for any event or festival, it should be the experience during the event that eventually determines the event's success. The harshest critique any event can receive is the non-compliance of ADA guidelines and the failure to provide a good experience for the attendee. (*)

Before assessing the current ADA plan, determine what kind of event is being planned. There are some big differences with events held in a downtown/city street venue versus at a private venue. For example, some elements that may need to be taken into consideration are power requirements for attractions, the pedestrian walkways, available parking spaces, free or ticketed admission, restroom access with hand wash stations and if there is food and drink available. If accessibility is a problem with any of these components, there is a potential for social media backlash.

Parking

When entering a downtown festival, the most important component to some people is the availability of ample parking including ADA parking. Everyone wants to be close to the entrance gate. Several festivals rely on available street parking and friendly businesses to allow their parking lots to be used for the occasion. Typically, not many ADA street parking spaces are available in a downtown block and not many are available in a business parking lot. If a festival is able to get more than 4 ADA spaces on the street and more than 2 ADA spaces in a business parking lot, then only a handful of the attendees looking for ADA parking will be able to park reasonably close to the entrance. The remaining attendees looking for ADA parking will be required to park at a distance that can be prohibitive for them to attend the event. Consideration of these patrons should be taken into account when there is a possibility that they will be required to walk 10 blocks only to get to the gate and have to stand in line to buy their tickets.

If an event has a large attendance of people needing ADA parking spaces, is that need identified and matched with a solution? There are a few solutions for events with limited ADA parking. Within the downtown festival setting, if the festival uses a business parking lot for vendor staging or VIP parking, why not increase that space and use it for ADA parking or have a designated ADA lot? The limited ADA spaces have been multiplied exponentially by creating a designated lot. If the festival is unable to secure a business parking lot, try working with the local law enforcement to designate regular spaces as ADA parking

spaces. Even if the first block leading up to the entrance gate or a side street is utilized, creating and assigning additional ADA spaces may not be enough. However, this can mean the difference between a person finding appropriate parking close to the entrance or returning home unsuccessful. Once turned away, their perchance to tweet or post on Facebook about their negative experience is increased. This is also the same for venues with a designated parking lot. It is easy to change regular parking spaces into ADA designated spaces near the entrance. The attendees will notice immediately and those that utilize them will be grateful for the consideration. You may not get the public appreciation via Facebook and Twitter, but you will not get the negative attention which elicits more publicity than positive posts.

Admission

After the logistics for the parking situation have been addressed, it is time to consider the process for admissions. Is the admission setup ADA accessible? If the event is a free event and there is no line control or ticketing involved, there should be no issues. For ticketed events, the window of the ticket booth should be low enough for an easy transaction with a patron in a wheel chair. Consider implementing a seller policy for dealing with patrons that need a lower table and to come out of the booth to provide additional ticketing service. This style of customer service will be handy for those in a wheel chair and to other patrons who may need to utilize a table for the admission transaction. This will also prevent them from feeling singled out to a special line or being treated other than normal.

Power Requirements

Once inside the event, the fun begins for the attendees. There are always various attractions and sights to see. While the guest may not be aware of it, events try to predict and control the flow of traffic by use of pathways. In that way, attendees will be able to view all the attractions. At the San Mateo County Fair, for example, the most popular attraction is Ham Bone Express 3 with the racing pigs. Attractions like this require electrical power and usually more than just a regular power circuit. To access that kind of power, many venues have to provide generators and run the electrical cables to it. These cables are frequently covered with cable ramps to minimize the trip hazard. These cable ramps, even when used in conjunction with ADA ramps, are still cumbersome and awkward to roll over in a wheel chair; similar to driving over a speed bump. An alternative to using cable ramps and running cables along the ground is to fly them. Have the cables suspended from the ground and supported with trussing. This keeps them from becoming a trip hazard.

With cables suspended, access for everyone, including a wheel chair patron will be much easier and appreciated. In situations where cables must be ran across the ground, using cable ramps is the preferred method. A good maintenance crew can quickly make and install some slightly angled ramps or your electrical company can place cable ramps with the ADA ramp attachment. Be sure to maintain the ramps throughout the event in case a repair is needed. These slight modifications will improve the pedestrian flow throughout the event.



Cables secured to trussing covering a major walkway

(*) - This article is not meant to provide legal counsel as local and state laws may vary and be stricter than current federal requirements. This article is only meant to provide some insight and to help begin the process for making each event ADA (American Disability Act) customer friendly.



Food & Beverage

During the pedestrian movement in the event, expect that patrons will get food and drink. One of the highlights for many festivals, including the San Mateo County Fair, is food. From funnel cakes to deep fried snickers, the food is always one of the more popular attractions. Many festivals and events have concessionaires that use knock-downs (food service tents), trucks and trailers for food service. All are adapted to serve everyone equally well when purchasing and receiving food. Some food trucks have an extra high counter, but staff should exit the truck to provide a reasonable level of customer service. The more common issue arises when the buyer tries to retrieve napkins, add ketchup, mustard or other condiments to their meal. These condiment shelves are typically higher than the serving shelves and can be difficult for someone in a wheel chair to reach. It can be difficult to hold a taco plate and grab a napkin and salsa from these shelves. Look for situations like these and provide vendors with a table to use for condiments and other items. This eliminates the feeling of frustration for the patron and a potential confrontation between a patron and concessionaire. Occasionally there are concessionaires located in confined spaces where a table would not be very serviceable. Ask the concessionaire to offer and to add the condiments as needed for the customer. While it may slow the sales line, this type of personal service is

always appreciated. The bottom line and high sales may be the primary goal, but a happy customer will be returning next year because of this extra service.

Seating

Another way to encourage consumption by the patron is to offer plenty of seating with designated spaces for ADA patrons and their companions. Take a few minutes to analyze the layout. What kind of seating is available? How many of those seats are assigned as companion seating and are wheel chair accessible? At the San Mateo County Fair, such seating is designated with at least one seat every 100 feet and with a line of sight to the next one. The bench and the ground are marked to show these locations. Designating this type of seating will help those with wheel chairs and companions find seats together. This perpetuates the family atmosphere and bonding that festivals and events promote.

Restrooms

As with seating, restroom facilities are very important for any event. For those events with a set venue and restrooms installed, this is easier to handle. For additional convenience, port-a-potties can be placed throughout the venue. Many facilities have wheel chair accessible restrooms, but not many of the port-a-potties are wheel chair accessible and can be difficult to locate. Typically, the best way to provide wheel chair accessible restrooms is to provide at least one

for every 6-10 in a group. If the budget allows, add additional units. In those situations where fewer than 4 are placed and they are regular units, signage can be paramount. Use the signage to show the direction and the approximate distance away for a wheel chair accessible unit. Keep directions concise and simple to read with the restrooms easy to locate. This is also true for hand wash stations. The majority of the rentable hand wash stations are wheel chair accessible, but it is always good to double check. An additional benefit to renting and using wheel chair accessible units will be for mothers and fathers with children. The additional room to assist their small children will make the event more family-friendly.

In summary, the above suggestions are not necessarily for legal requirements in certain states, but they are all good items to consider when dealing with the public and to prevent adverse feelings at the event. It may not be feasible to implement all of the suggestions, but many can be done with minimal cost and effort, especially if discussed with a number of volunteers and committees. Develop a new committee for ADA items and assign them the task of identifying the various situations and implementing the solutions. They can place signage for seating before the gates open up, provide suggestions to other committees and develop a plan that is implemented on a yearly basis. This may not be as glamorous as the entertainment committee, but it is a necessity and expected by the visitors. There is no instant gratification from these changes and implementations, but the image of the event can avoid negative social media comments that are detrimental to future events. Each event is designed to provide entertainment and fun for visitors and this is one component that can enhance the overall experience.

Matt Cranford has over 15 years of event industry expertise with a concentrated focus in multi-purpose facilities and concert halls. Cranford is currently the Fair & Festival Event Manager for the San Mateo County Fair at the San Mateo County Event Center, a large-scale, nine day event in the Bay Area. He is a Trained Crowd Manager with International Association of Venue Managers (IAVM) and earned a B.S. in Business Administration from California State University, Stanislaus.