



By Gil Cunningham

STARTING FROM SCRATCH: Bringing a Brand New Event to Life



Luke Bryan steps out into the crowd at 2012's Country Thunder (Photo credit: Rick Diamond / Getty Images)



Zac Brown takes in the moment at 2012's Country Thunder (Photo credit: Rick Diamond / Getty Images)



Eric Church kicks off his 2012 Country Thunder performance (Photo credit: Rick Diamond / WireImage)

There are multiple kinds of events: those that are already established and well groomed, the ongoing but struggling ones in need of a facelift and brand new events that are just an idea.

Starting an event from scratch can be a daunting task, especially for someone that's new to the business. There are many obstacles to consider before the planning process can even begin: finding a location, determining capacity, hiring production workers, securing a stage, lights, tickets and more.

Many decisions surround a night of entertainment; whether all of the actions are performed in-house or everything is outsourced, these options need to be carefully sifted through.

The decidedly most important part of an event is simple: the talent. People aren't going to attend a festival or fair if there is plainly no one on the line-up to draw them there. That's where talent buy-

ers come in and choosing the right one could make or break your entire budget.

For starters, it's important to know what talent buyers do. In initial conversations, the client will voice what exactly it is they are looking for: genre, budget, date and location. Is this going to be a "classic country" show or does the ultimate draw come from hot contemporary acts to pursue a younger crowd? The talent buyer will take this information and use all of their connections within the biggest agencies to find out who is available and meets that criteria. There are many important elements to consider here one may not initially think of; that's where the professionals come in. For example, a name might strike as familiar, but does the act have current product out? Have they been getting recent airplay?

The biggest factors to consider when choosing the best act for your audience are:

- Who has a record out? Have they released any product in recent years? If not, would it be a greatest hits show?
- Who has been nominated for a recent award?
- Who is currently getting airplay on radio?
- Does the date route for the lowest possible price?
- Who is committed to a tour?

Let's focus on point two for a second: who has been nominated for a recent award? One thing people may not know is that award shows hold a lot of weight in regards to who may bring out the best numbers. This is especially true in country music.

First and foremost, country music has more award shows than any other genre. The Country Music Association Awards, or CMA's, has frequent buzz surrounding the show year-after-year. Under this scope it's no surprise that the CMA Awards impact music in two big ways: increasing record sales and exposing new artists.

It goes without saying that when an artist blows the crowd away during their performance, the viewers will be more interested in their current releases. As a result, it's normal for country music sales to spike after the show.

Not to mention up-and-coming acts trying to break into the big league frequently see their career skyrocket after they've taken home New Artist of the Year. The past 5 winners in this category have gone on to achieve huge success just the following year. For example, in 2007 then brand new Taylor Swift won her first CMA and went on to release *Fearless*, the album that changed her career, in 2008. The next year new group Lady Antebellum took home the prize and released arguably the biggest hit of their career, *Need You Now*, just one year later.

It is important to note that a talent buyer with the skill to recognize these up-and-coming acts before their take-off is essential. When award shows air, viewers see entertainment but talent buyers see dollar signs ignite around the most celebrated. When the newer acts become the stars of the night, they will usually cost more on Monday than they did the week before. However, if an event already has this act confirmed the price stays the same. Therefore, a talent buyer that cannot only get the best deals on the already established, well-known artists, but can also recognize support in the form of a dark horse, can put their event two steps ahead of its competitors.

Another big consideration is who is currently on the road. If an act is on tour chances are they're already playing the market or they won't have a free weekend during the tour. In 2013 there have been 19 major country tours to try to work around. Not only do these tours take away 19 main headline acts, but mid-level opening acts and breakthrough baby acts are all taken for the ride. This eliminates a strong number of contenders to book for festivals.

It is for this reason that choosing an experienced talent buyer is crucial. They will contact agencies and compile a list of available names. Once this is built, the client and talent buyer will sit down and sift through all available options until a decision on who to pursue is made. Then it's up to the buyer to negotiate the fee, send out offers, perform contract negotiations and more. The buyer's job can be summed up in one sentence: to make the client money. That's why it is important to find a talent buyer who has strong relationships with agents and other buyers out there. With these relationships, the buyer can go out and see if there are other events in the area that want to put in an offer for the artists; therefore, the date would be routed and the price tag cheaper.

There are six main phases of an event a talent buyer will help you through, including:

- Artist selection
- Event marketing
- Consulting
- Ticketing
- Sponsorship
- Event production and management.

In the first phase of artist selection the talent buyer will take the client's top choice and submit offers to the agency. They handle all artist fee and contract rider negotiations until the offer is confirmed at the lowest possible price.

From there, the buyer will then coordinate all event marketing. This includes assistance in developing marketing plans and advertisements, providing the client with

the necessary marketing materials from each artist performing and working with the management companies to coordinate the announce, radio interviews and more.

Next up is consulting. Once your line-up is established to complete satisfaction, it's not over yet. Don't forget people will need tickets to enter the venue, the acts will need a stage to stand on, a microphone to sing through and lights to give the audience a true show. It's the event's responsibility to provide all of the above materials.

Initially this could be overwhelming but with the right talent buyer all of these services can be outsourced to the best people in the business. Again, connections are key and the top talent buying agencies have a partner in ticketing companies, production companies and existing sponsors to add to the client's bottom line.

Finally, the talent buyer's last phase will be the actual event production and management. The right agency can provide a professional production management staff to advance the show and coordinate with every tour manager involved that all aspects are where they should be.

Staff will attend the event day of show to ensure everything runs smoothly. From catering and meet and greets to merch tables and sponsor booths, this staff will take all of the headaches away so the client can actually enjoy the show.

While a first year event might have to start from scratch, it can blossom into an annual machine. It's the people surrounding the event that can lay the foundation for attendees to want to return. The first step is finding the right talent buyer since a brand new event relies on the faces shown on the flyer to draw the crowds.

Gil Cunningham began his career in the entertainment industry over 40 years ago and since the development of Neste Event Marketing in 1996, Gil has produced hundreds of events and booked thousands of artists for a variety of clients. He has his ear to the ground for new trends in the industry in all music genres and prides himself on identifying up-and-coming acts that he feels have the talent and right ingredients to take them to the next level. With numerous industry awards, including ACM's Talent Buyer of the Year, Gil is instrumental in establishing major events throughout North America.

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