



SMILE!

By Scott Huntley

Light up your face with gladness
Hide every trace of sadness
Although a tear may be ever so near
That's the time you must keep on trying
Smile, what's the use of crying?
You'll find that life is still worthwhile
If you just smile.

- Nat King Cole

I learned a great deal from my first job at Disneyland back in the early 1980s but the most important knowledge I took away from my four years at *"The Happiest Place on Earth"* is that a smile changes everything.

I found that it didn't really matter how bad my day had been or how people had treated me during the week, walking through the gates and seeing the smiles on everyone's faces from the costumed characters to the popcorn vendors to the small children who were experiencing the Magic Kingdom for the very first time, changed my whole demeanor and I was happy.

Though it has been a long time since I was "Pixie Dusted" during my orientation at Disney, I have carried their happy philosophy throughout my career. I've become almost evangelical about the power of smiling in every situation and I have seen the phenomenal effect a positive attitude and a kind smile can have not only on the people around me but also on my events as a whole.

Though we all know the stresses of putting on festivals and what it can do to our demeanor, studies tell us that the simple act of smiling can do a great deal to alleviate that stress and elevate our moods and the dispositions of those around us.

The most important study in my eyes is that of a group of Swedish scientists at Uppsala University who determined that it is almost impossible for humans to frown at someone who is showing them a sincere smile. Yes, smiling and the resultant happy feeling it brings to us have been proven to be contagious. These scientists found that the unconscious mind takes over when we see a smile and that we have to fight not to smile back.

What happens next is wonderful. The simple act of contracting the muscles that make us smile starts a chain reaction that can change our demeanor almost instantly. The contraction of those particular muscles causes the release of neuropeptides that instantly start fighting off anxiety. These tiny molecules are what let our brains communicate with our bodies and facilitate messaging to our entire being. When we smile, the feel-good neurotransmitters dopamine, endorphins and serotonin are all released, relaxing our bodies.

The endorphins act as an organic pain reliever, easing the mid-event headache that can debilitate any of us after a water main breaks in the middle of the food court or the opening act didn't know that there is a city named Riverside in 46 of the 50 states and is currently looking for their stage in a park that is 500 miles away from our festival.

The serotonin release brought on by smiling serves as a mood lifter; smiling just makes us happier. A team of British researchers found that smiling makes us

feel better than eating chocolate. Any of us who has spent a few minutes in line at one of our vendor tents to get a chocolate-covered something in the midst of our event can attest to the fact that a bit of sugar-infused cocoa can change our day in an instant. The researchers say that one genuine smile can bring on the same good feelings as 2000 bars of chocolate!

While pounding 193 pounds of chocolate would certainly be a detriment to our health, conjuring up a smile can actually have therapeutic and even life-extending effects. The chemicals released into our bodies when we smile can even lower our heart rate and blood pressure. In 2010, a research study at Wayne State University examined the baseball card photos of Major League players from 1952. The study found that the span of a player's smile could actually predict the span of his life! Players who didn't smile in their pictures lived an average of only 72.9 years, while players with beaming smiles lived an average of 79.9 years.

A smile is also one of the most uniform expressions of humans from all cultures. Professor Paul Ekman, a pioneer in the study of emotions and their relation to facial expressions, found that smiles have the same meaning in most societies. Ekman studied people from Japan, Argentina, Chile and Brazil and found that they all judged the meaning of a smile in the same way. He thought that perhaps the data might be inconclusive since all of these people could have learned the meaning of expressions by watching Charlie Chaplin and John Wayne. He then found an isolated tribe in Papua, New Guinea and he discovered that these subjects, though never exposed to images from modern culture, attributed smiles to descriptions of situations in the same way you and I would.

Professor Ekman did find, though, that while people can easily make the right facial movements to turn on the physical sensations of anger or disgust, most people can't move one crucial muscle around the eyes that must be moved to generate the physiology of happiness. So don't try the "fake it till you make it" approach to finding happiness through smiling. You have to actually find something to be happy about, even if that something is looking at someone else's genuine smile. Remember that we are all in the business of fun, so finding a genuine smile is an easy thing: look first for a child, because they smile far more than we grownups do and they are more than happy to share!

De-Stressing A Bad Situation

Smiles have always been used to calm and comfort others. Though none of us will likely ever get through an event without encountering someone who is less

than pleased, we can remember to use our smiles and positive energy to bring others into a happy place so that we can work to fix issues.

My grandfather was a subscriber to the theory that unless you are unconscious or bleeding, no trip to the doctor or hospital was too important to be delayed for just a few moments by a stop at the ice cream store. We should always remember that we carry around with us at all times the tools to make people feel as if they have just taken a big bite of mint chip. When we smile, others perceive us as being more likeable, friendly and approachable. If you come into an angry situation with a smile and the openness to talk about issues, a mutually beneficial solution will come much faster, and in the end there will be at least one more smile at your event.

Hard Work Can Be Fun If We Make It So

As many in the festival industry do, I work with a large group of volunteers who are the heart and soul of the event. Our Coordinating Committee, in particular, puts thousands of man-hours into making the festival happen. They love it, and the festival is a powerful source of happiness for each of them. The stress of long hours and of the ever-changing set of issues that are always present at a large outdoor event can take a toll on any normally happy person, so we have made it a point to focus much of our attention on creating smiles, starting within our own organization.

Our first goal in any project is to make it fun. Taking the time not only to applaud the work of these fine people, but also to find the humor in every situation is paramount. We take and share photos and videos of the oft-times hilarious ways in which we must solve issues. We stress the importance of remembering and retelling the happy stories that we are told by attendees and participants alike. In short, we laugh about everything.

I have a friend who is a gelotologist. Though I often tell people that she studies the effects of wiggly dessert on the human condition, the truth is that her field of study is laughter and its effects on the body, from a psychological and physiological perspective. Though there are many fancy scientific words to describe it, in layman's terms, she explains that laughing changes our brains and in turn our way of looking at what we are doing. When we laugh about funny little things and turn work into play, we work better, harder, and for longer periods of time without tiring. Laughing allows us to release pent-up tension and emotion that are inevitably present in the preparation and execution of a successful festival or event.

In Hollywood, it's called comic relief. Directors use it to allow the audience

a little release through laughter so that overwhelming tension in a scene doesn't cause viewers to break attention to a serious scene. In the festival world we call it preserving sanity. In a blog that I wrote very late on infrastructure set-up day for the 2013 festival I said...

"Yes, it's midnight and many of (our) committee members are out on the streets preparing for the arrival of the artists early in the morning, and I praise them for their dedication. Tomorrow, it will most likely rain and they will be out there smiling and happy, knowing that at 11:00 on Friday morning – when the sun once again shines on the beautiful Columbus Riverfront – their year of work will all be paid back by the smiles on the faces of everyone who comes to the festival."

I could not have known how true my words were when I penned them. As our participants arrived to start their load-in on Thursday morning, the rain started and didn't let up all day long. About noon, I crossed one of our new city bridges where participants were feverishly setting up their booths and came upon two of my committee members leading several artists in a rousing chorus of "Singin' in the Rain," which not only brought a big smile to my face, but had the rain-soaked artists around them bent over with laughter. By using the power of fun, my volunteers were turning what could have been a miserable experience into a happy memory for quite a few people. The next morning as the clouds parted and the sun did truly shine again, we had a festival full of happy people ready to put on the most successful festival in our 53-year history.

Since starting my crusade to put a smile on the faces of everyone who had anything to do with our event, I have seen some very big payback. Our festival has received nationwide accolades from participants and attendees alike, and the grand majority of the comments that I receive are about the smiling faces that were waiting for all who attended.

As you spend the countless hours that it takes to produce your events, make sure that your checklists include the words smile and laugh and take a few minutes to add a couple of songs to your playlist: "When You're Smilin'" and "Make 'Em Laugh" can be great reminders of some powerful tools for a successful event.

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