SAFELY DOES IT

By Mark Breen

TOP TIPS FOR PARADE SAFETY

Parades happen the world over and can regularly draw crowds into their hundreds of thousands Here in Ireland we have our annual St. Patrick's Day parades, which sees every city, town, village and parish bedecked in green for the day. St. Patrick's Day parades now take place all around the world, such is the impact of the Irish and our culture. Indeed, all around the world different nations and religions run parades of varying shapes and sizes.

Parades can be among the most creative and exciting events to watch and enjoy as well as to plan and run. That said, they are an event possessed of their own unique characteristics that can present a range of challenges to us as event organisers.

The Challenges

The first major challenge posed by parades is that they make us as event organisers, specifically safety-conscious event organisers, do something we not generally happy to do – mixing pedestrians with moving vehicles. The risk posed here is obvious but, as with most risks, it can be managed and made reasonably safe.

Another of the challenges is that the involvement of children is often integral to a parade event. They have a saying in Hollywood that you should never work with animals and children and the same has often been said with respect to children and events. The risk here is that children are more inclined to be caught up in the excitement of being part of an event and are generally less likely to take direction and structure. This can make it tough for us as event organisers to ensure they are safe while partaking in and enjoying the parade.

Children in the crowd pose a particular risk too. Parades tend to be family events so it's natural to have children in the crowd. In fact, if we DON'T have children in the crowd then we've probably done

something wrong. The issue arises if and when children run towards the parade floats or groups. This often happens if groups within the parade are giving out free sweets or promotional items. Children get drawn forward and this can put them in harm's way, particularly when the parade includes vehicles.

Top Tips

We've learned a lot in our time to date planning & managing parades. These have ranged from Dublin Pride parades with 25,000 participants and hundreds of thousands watching, through to smaller St. Patrick's Day parades with only 3,000 participants, mainly children, and 20,000 people watching.

We approach them all the same way and there are some key elements common to them all. They include:

Separate Your Vehicles and Pedestrians for as Long as You Can

We always plan to have the vehicles stage (assemble) in one location and the pedestrians to gather in groups elsewhere. Often these locations are very close to one another but still maintain that important separation so we cut down on the issues encountered when crowds of people including children mix with (often large) moving vehicles. When possible we carry this over to the far end of the parade, having vehicles and pedestrians finish the parade at different points.

Insist That Representatives from Participant Groups Attend a Briefing in Advance of the Parade

This affords us as event organisers an opportunity to impress upon the groups the importance of certain systems and procedures in place for the parade. It is also a great chance for the participants to ask questions to make sure they understand what to expect and what's expected of them.

Divide Your Parade Route into Zones

Do this and assign responsibility for the safety of the participants and spectators in each zones to a Zone Safety Manager. We find that this allows people to get to grips with their zone and understand its unique challenges and key points, rather than having to understand the whole route and all its nuances.

Instruct Participants Not to Throw Things from Vehicles into the Crowd

I've seen this go wrong in a variety of ways. Sweets being thrown out to the crowd fall short and a child tries to squeeze through the barrier to retrieve it and gets stuck. Other times children have rushed forward into the path of parade vehicles to get free promotional items being given out. The safe way to facilitate this is for the parade group to have walking participants interacting with the crowd and handing things out directly.

Have a System in Place to Ensure Vehicle Safety

The biggest issue we run into here is community groups, sports clubs etc. using long flatbed trailers on which they position children and adults, often interacting with a themed set. Railings on the trailer are key. What the children will be doing while on the trailer is important. The manner in which the driver controls the vehicle helps ensure the children enjoy the experience safely. You should have a system to ensure these and other considerations are boxed off.

Parades are great events, providing fun for all the family. They can be tough to have run smoothly and safely. Hopefully this column may have provided you with some tips and insights to help you in running your next parade.

Mark Breen is Co-Founder & Senior Partner of Cuckoo Events based in Dublin, Ireland. He is an award- winning event Safety Officer and one of the most experienced and qualified event safety practitioners in Ireland. He has worked at the London 2012 Olympics as well as on some of Ireland's largest outdoor events. He writes and speaks regularly on all things event-related, particularly event safety. He is a Graduate Member of the Marketing Institute of Ireland and holds a Postgraduate Diploma in PR & Events. He has specialist qualifications in Spectator Safety Management as well as Crowd Science. He is also soon to begin an MSc in Crowd Safety & Risk Analysis. Mark and the Team at Cuckoo are passionate about helping people run safer events and devote a lot of time to doing so. Mark is very active on Twitter @ mark_breen and @CuckooEvents. The multiple award-winning Cuckoo Events website can be found at cuckoo.ie