

*How to Turn
Your Event in to*

THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

By Julie Austin

P.T. Barnum's name is synonymous with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, but that was actually one of his last ventures. He didn't even get into the circus business until he was 60 years old. For most of his life he was an event planner who pushed the boundaries of innovation and the customer experience. He said that his goal in life was to bring pleasure to as many people as possible while making money doing it.



He always wanted to make sure as many people as possible were able to attend his events, which is one reason he took events on the road and created events for all age groups. His events were able to be enjoyed by everyone from working class immigrants to the wealthy elite of society.

He prided himself on being able to create memories for those people who did attend his festivals and events. Creating memories is what event planners do, or at least they should do if they want to have a successful and profitable event.

I normally speak to industries that are being disrupted in some way or are going under, but the event industry is doing great! Here's some good news. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the event industry is expected to increase 11% between 2016 and 2026. Outlook is positive. 85% of event planners are optimistic about the future. Which is why now is the perfect time to innovate. Yes, innovate!

Most companies and organizations only think about innovating when the economy is bad or their business is going under. But that's the worst time to think about innovation. That's when you're just struggling to keep the lights on, you've probably had to let people go, and the general mood is gloomy.

People tend to be more creative when they're in a good mood, relaxed, and feel positive about the future.

The most successful companies are constantly innovating. Not just to avoid disruption, but to grow their business and solve problems. Even though the events industry is doing well right now, there are always problems to solve.

According to Event Manager Blog, the top five problems facing the events industry right now are:

- Budgets
- Finding sponsors
- Attendee numbers
- Too many competing events
- New ideas

All of these issues could be solved by using a little creativity and innovation. If you have more sponsors and your attendee numbers are up, that helps solve the problem of budgets. If there are too many competing events, you need to innovate in order to stand out from the other events. And the best way to come up with new ideas is to come up with a lot of ideas and create a culture of innovation within your organization. Make creativity and innovation a part of your life.

Customers have a lot of choices today. Even if you run a niche event in

a small town, you still have competition for people's time and money. They could spend the day at the lake, or go bowling, hang out with friends, or even stay at home binge-watching their favorite TV shows on a huge flat screen TV with surround sound. You have to give them a good reason to show up and give you their hard-earned money. You have to be different and unique.

Tom Harrison, coordinator of the Black Bear Festival in Plymouth, NC, vows to stay one step ahead by constantly innovating every year. His goal is to surprise people. He never wants to hear a conversation where someone asks, "Are you going to the Bear Festival this year?" and the reply is "No, been there - done that." Instead, he wants to hear the reply, "Bear Festival?! Are you kidding?! I can't wait to see what those crazy folks are going to do this year!"

His formula is to add and take away each year and out-do himself from one year to the next. Harrison says "The NC Black Bear Festival is a creative outlet for me that is bringing smiles to people's faces and bringing much needed revenue, as well notoriety to our community. The Town of Plymouth has adopted the Black Bear as their brand and it is on our water tower and town vehicles. Businesses are adopting a bear theme."



Some of his creative ideas include:

- World's first custom made mechanical Black Bear ride (just like a mechanical bull)
- An electric Black Bear custom made in China for kids to ride
- Charging Station with a 7' chainsaw carved bear holding a giant wooden peanut in the shell with a charging cord hanging out of the peanut
- Conducting Bear Tours in the wild
- A Baby Bear contest with prizes for the best dressed baby
- The Blackberry Extravaganza, which required all the food vendors to offer a blackberry dish. They were then judged and the vendor fee of the best tasting blackberry dish was refunded. They also got a ribbon and social media recognition.
- The same thing can be done for retail vendors. The best decorated vendor space with a Black Bear or Blackberry theme received the same recognition as above.
- Costumed Black Bear on Water Skis with another Black bear driving the boat
- National Black Bear Day on the first Saturday in June

P.T. Barnum knew the value of innovation and used it constantly. If you want people to share your event info through social media, or if you want the press to pick up a story about your event, you have to have something for people to talk about. Word of mouth and PR is the best form of advertising and it's free! But you have to give them something unique and exciting to talk about.

Moses Kimball ran a competing museum similar to Barnum's. One day he contacted Barnum and asked to meet him for a business proposition. Barnum was always open to working with anyone, including his competition. So, they got together and Kimball brought a very interesting curiosity with him to the meeting... a mermaid.

Kimball asked Barnum if he wanted to rent the mermaid for a price and display it in his museum. Not only did Barnum think that was a wonderful idea, but he wanted to take the mermaid on the road so more people could have the experience of seeing it.

In true P.T. Barnum fashion, he created a huge buzz around the mermaid. He gave it an exotic name... the FeeJee Mermaid. And he had thousands of brochures printed up and had people handing them out on street corners all over New York City. He literally created mermaid fever. The press went crazy with the story.

So, on opening day, the public anxiously awaited the mermaid showing, and people lined up for hours waiting to get in. They were expecting a beautiful mermaid with

long, flowing hair and a metallic tail. Instead, the mermaid was a hideous carcass of a dead fish that looked like it died in agony.

Now you would think that would have been the end of Barnum's mermaid show. Once word got out about how horrible it was, surely nobody would buy tickets. But, in fact, the opposite happened. People told their friends "I can't explain it to you. You just have to see it." And they were so curious, they bought their own ticket. The FeeJee Mermaid went down in history as a cult classic, even having its own episode of the X-files.

The bottom line is that it got people talking. And that's what you need if you want your festival or event to get free word of mouth press. You constantly have to innovate or someone else out there will come along and do it better and take away your audience. You constantly have to surprise them.

A great example of a festival that literally has their own FeeJee Mermaid is the Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival. It was co-founded by Bill Becker as a way to encourage reef protection in the Florida Keys. "The Underwater Music Festival is a way to celebrate the coral reef" says Becker, "and we celebrate it by looking for a balance between protection of the reef and public enjoyment. The more people realize what's down there and enjoy it, the more they're likely to protect it."

The unique event takes place every year at Looe Key Reef, an area of Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary about 6 miles south of Big Pine Key from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The underwater experience is a chance for divers to discover the Keys' diversity of marine life and coral diversity. Songs like the theme from "The Little Mermaid" and "Yellow Submarine" are piped underwater through special speakers. Divers dress up in costumes and play custom-made musical instruments. Since sound travels five times faster underwater, the experience is especially surreal.

The first thing on the list of issues facing event planners is budget. But the best way to solve the problem is through creativity. When Bill Becker and his partner Fred Troxel first conceived the idea for a live music event some 30 years ago, they started out with a non-existent budget. They wanted to put on an event, but didn't have a theater, so they decided to use what they did have that was free - a reef.

They soon realized that this could become their competitive advantage. Everyone else was putting on regular music events, so they became unique and different by default. Sometimes the best way to establish your competitive advantage is by

simply using what you have and being more creative than your competition.

The Underwater Music Festival had a lot of help from people who spread the word, (before social media) and the press, who saw it as a unique story they could run with and also something that helped the planet.

One of the things P.T. Barnum did best was to create public demand for his events. He came up with a new publicity ploy, his own newspaper, which he gave away for free. It was created to entice the public into going to see his shows.

It had behind the scenes information about his performers and the business side of show business. It also included the top 33 reasons why every man, woman and child should go to a P.T. Barnum event. This was long before David Letterman's Top 10 list.

He wrote his autobiography and sold them at his events to create another stream of income. This is something all event planners should be thinking about when it comes to budget. Not just how you can save money, but even more important, how to create multiple streams of income.

P.T. Barnum's goal in life was to bring pleasure to as many people as possible, while making money doing it. This should be the goal of every event planner. You create memories. Most people don't get to do that for a living. Cherish it, and make sure you always have the customer in mind. Surprise them, and help them create memories that bring them back year after year.

Julie Austin is an award-winning inventor and innovation keynote speaker. She's an internationally known thought leader on the topic of innovation, and CEO of the consulting firm Creative Innovation Group. She's been an innovation keynote speaker for corporations such as Procter & Gamble, Novartis Pharmaceuticals, Northrop Grumman, and Cognizant Technology Solutions. She's also been featured in the books "Patently Female" and "Girls Think of Everything". Her patented product, swiggies, wrist water bottles, have been a NASDAQ product of the year semifinalist and are currently sold in 24 countries. Julie and her products have appeared on The Today Show, The Queen Latifa Show, HGTV, Lifetime, ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX News, Inc. Magazine, Fast Company, and the Wall Street Journal, along with dozens of TV shows, magazines and radio shows around the world. For more information, go to: www.creativeinnovationgroup.com