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SEQUESTRATION UPDATE: LESSONS LEARNED THUS FAR

Under these unprecedented circumstances, air shows around the country are making real-time changes to different aspects of their planning. A few items for you to consider as you develop and adjust your own plans for the 2013 season:

- It's important that you keep your spectators and prospective spectators informed. Even if you have decided to cancel your event this year, make it clear that you have not gone out of business; you are only taking a year off. For many who are not involved in our business, news reports seem to suggest that the air show business no longer exists. It is important for all of us to help combat that perception. Whether you use advertising or public relations or some other tool, do what is necessary to ensure that this perception does not become ingrained in the minds of your prospective customers.
- Successful shows are being held without military participation. All over the country, including at some of our industry's largest shows, event organizers are filling the holes left by the military's absence and providing quality aerial entertainment to enthusiastic, appreciative audiences. Individual shows are responding to these unusual circumstances in different ways, but the most successful events thus far are adding additional civilian performers and refocusing their marketing efforts.
- Some shows are finding that the extensive news coverage on the cancellation of military participation in air shows is undermining and complicating their marketing efforts. Be aware that the prevailing message so far this year is that air shows and/or military participation in air shows has been cancelled. Target your marketing to combat this problem and enlist the support of local media to help ensure that your message gets through.
- Re-evaluate your own perspective on what is and what is not a "headline" act. The air show community has a number of acts around which a resourceful event organizer can build a show. With the military unlikely to reappear at air shows this year, challenge your own pre-conceptions about what may constitute a "big finish." For years, the military has provided many shows with their "grand finale," but that will not be the case this year. So, adjust and reposition. ICAS performer members are eager to help and many are demonstrating their own creativity in working with event organizers who find themselves in unfamiliar situations.
- Similarly, re-evaluate what is and what is not acceptable as a static display aircraft. C-5s, C-17s and C-130s take up a lot of room on a ramp. Without them, you may want to consider inviting/accepting less-than-exotic aircraft to position on your ramp so that spectators have aircraft to look at during your show.

- Lack of military statics could create a barren-looking ramp area. Several shows have responded by moving the crowd line deeper onto the ramp so that the crowd area is narrower and the lack of large static display aircraft is not so obvious.
- If you have the latitude, hire more acts. That has been the most common step taken by shows hoping to blunt the impact of sequestration. And, once you have made those decisions, loudly trumpet the additions. Many event organizers are discovering that their local media is sympathetic to the difficult situation that events are facing. All over the country, shows are getting unprecedented editorial coverage on the addition of new acts...information that would not have generated news coverage in the past.
- If you still have time, consider “non-standard” additions to your show this year. Car shows, marching band competitions, jump rope jump-offs, hot air balloon “glows,” radio-controlled aircraft competitions, 10K running races, World War II battle re-enactments, vintage military vehicle display, and partnering with local major and minor league sports franchises by bringing athletes out to sign autographs and attract fans. Use your imagination. Loosen up on your own definition of what is and what is not acceptable and focus on attracting an audience. Bring the people in however you can to ensure that you are in a position to stay in business and return (we hope) to something like “business as normal” next year. Of course, you will want to be careful about additions that cost money, but produce little additional revenue, so be sure to make objective decisions about relative expense vs. prospective additional revenue.
- Recalculation of the budgetary impact of sequestration is important. Although it is possible to put on a strong show without military participation, most shows are finding that attendance and revenue suffer somewhat. Although many shows have historic information on the impact of not having a jet team, few have experience with the revenue implications of no military participation of any sort. From ticket sales to concessions activity to sponsorship, revenue is likely to be down for those shows that have historically had a significant military presence. Some analysis and “guesstimating” will help you set realistic revenue projections and avoid surprises on show day. In a small, informal survey of veteran air show event organizers, ICAS found that members are expecting 30-50 percent less revenue without military participation. Your experience, of course, will depend on the specifics of your own show.
- The most visible impact of sequestration on the air show industry has been its effect on military participation. But the FAA is also being impacted by sequestration. Although our principal contacts at the national level within the FAA are working hard to help us avoid these kinds of problems, local and regional offices are experiencing furloughs. This may change the manner in which you interface with regulatory authorities. Do not leave anything to chance; double check on even those issues that usually go off without a hitch. Add more time to all regulatory interface. Check back periodically to monitor progress. From FAA participation in completing DD Form 2535s and waiver applications to TFR, radio frequency and airspace requests, assume that the system will not work as it usually does. This type of issue has already been a problem for several event organizers; we encourage you to learn from the difficulties that they have had. One specific concern: if you had an air show TFR because you were hosting a military demo, be sure to check in with air traffic personnel if you expect to keep that TFR. In at least one case, FAA officials cancelled the TFR when they learned that the military participation had been cancelled.