

The following is taken from a speech by IFEA World President & CEO Steven Wood Schmader, CFEE.



The Power of Celebration

The Evolving and Important Role of Festivals & Events around the World

In my position, as the President of IFEA World, I have the unique opportunity to travel quite extensively and to see, firsthand, the power and impact of festivals and events, from both an internal perspective and an external one.

Extrapolating from recent IFEA surveys, the special events industry, worldwide, is now estimated to include over 4-5 million regularly re-occurring festivals and events large enough to require municipal support services, such as police, fire, parks, trash, etc.; add to that those one-time or less than annual major events (i.e., the Millennium Celebrations, the Olympics, World's Fairs, etc.) And the uncalculatable number of corporate celebrations, weddings, religious gatherings, school carnivals, and others, and you start to understand the huge impact of our industry, with an estimated combined economic impact in the trillions of U.S. Dollars and combined attendances that touch virtually every life on the planet several times over.

As evidenced around the world, festivals and events are among the most successful tools available to communities, states, regions, and even countries to increase tourism, create powerful and memorable branding and imaging opportunities, bond people together, encourage positive media coverage, enhance economic impact, and add to the quality of lives for those who live there.

Festivals and events are our "calling cards". They tell people who we are and what is important to us. Unfortunately, we don't always get to choose our own calling cards; sometimes they are chosen for us; for example – NYC & the tragedy of 9/11; Asia & Canada with the Sars virus and bird flu; Indonesia and the terrible destruction of the tsunami in that region; the health and human crisis's in Africa; "the troubles" of recent history in Belfast; New Orleans and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; the wars and ongoing violence in the Middle East; Russia and the tragic school shootings by Chechnya rebels; the devastating earthquakes in Italy; or the drug trade in Latin America. Trust me when I say that all of these places would much rather have their image and media coverage be tied to the "calling card" of a quality festival or event or other cultural happening, like those produced by the professionals in our unique industry.

For as long as anyone can remember, people have celebrated. Celebration itself is perhaps the most common denominator that we have, with the unique ability to cross all barriers of race, religion, ethnicity, age, politics, economics, education and geography.

From small, localized celebrations to mega-events with global outreach, festivals and events bring hope and joy that sometimes burns the brightest in it's simplest form; to the Olympics, who share a vision beyond just being a great sporting competition, and, as a result, succeed (with some global political posturing notwithstanding) in bringing the world together, if even for a brief few weeks, to celebrate our differences. The reason being, that the Olympics provides much more than just sports memories; most of us can't remember the downhill ski heats or what the pole-vaulting record was; but we do remember the Koreans marching in together in Sydney; the reception for the Iraqi soccer team in Athens; the tribute paid to the indigenous peoples of Australia; the re-introduction of China to the world; and other worldwide peace accords declared during the Olympic games. In fact, events have brought more people together, peacefully, than any other world entity or profession. Let's hope that the world will continue to see the important value in leaving politics and protests out of events, so that our industry can continue to use our events to bring the world closer together.

Ours is an industry that is built around dreams and imagination; and the people who understand not only the importance of dreaming, but know how to make them come true. We are an industry of "memory makers". We are also community builders, storytellers, vision painters, bridge builders, and the purveyors of possibility. We bring families, friends, communities, countries and peoples together. We help them celebrate the special things in their lives, inspire them to see more, and provide the spark that allows them to light the world around them. That is the gift that our industry brings to the world and that is the legacy that we will leave.

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The Changing Migration Patterns of Events & Culture

But building legacies takes time. Sometimes a very long time, when we consider where those legacies and traditions began and how they have shaped our identities.

For a few years now, national geographic magazine has been undertaking a program called the “genographic project”. Using DNA and a world-wide team of experts, they have tracked our ancestry - all the variously shaped and shaded people of earth - back to African hunter-gatherers, some 200,000 years ago. Which means, in some way, that we are all related!

Further using DNA research, these experts have been able to determine the patterns of human migration as we slowly populated the earth; leaving the African cradle into the Middle East some 70,000 years ago; Australia 50,000 years ago; Europe and Asia a short 40,000 years ago; and into the Americas only 10 to 20,000 years ago. Practically yesterday in world history terms!

This migration, they believe, came about through some kind of neurological mutation that led to spoken language by some and a calling / need to colonize the world. And with that migration, slowly, came not only new languages, but religious beliefs, political systems, and cultural identifiers. I would imagine that when these wanderers reached their new homes, especially given the challenges that they must have faced along the way, that the first thing they would have done is to celebrate. Before governments were formed, before cities were built, before laws were established, they celebrated. And we continue that pattern today, celebrating traditions, victories, life, death, birthdays, anniversaries, love, remembrance, achievements, war, peace, belief systems, change, agricultural products, education, patriotism and the list goes on. The need to celebrate seems inherent in everything we do. Governments celebrate; scientists celebrate; institutions and corporations celebrate; communities and countries celebrate; and, on occasion, the world celebrates.

Over time, those celebrations became the roots of our culture and heritage. Through music, clothing, dance, food, and storytelling we created our identities, our comfort zones, our brands and our images. The things that told others who we were and what was important to us; what we were proud of; and what our accomplishments were. Internally, these elements bonded us together. Externally, they became our cultural markers, much like the genetic markers on our DNA.

Over time, as migration patterns continued (and they continue today), many of these traditions were carried to other places and evolved into their own legacies, holding on to some components, adding new ones, and quickly distancing with others.

As time moved forward and people could travel more easily, many of these traditions were noted and taken back to be translated or shared with others. The carnivals of Nice, France found seeds of their event growing in the Mardi Gras of New Orleans, the Pasadena Tournament of Roses in Los Angeles and the Carnivals of Brazil; Oktoberfest in Munich spawned countless worldwide imitators; Chinese new year is now celebrated in many places outside of Asia; and each march 17th many of our global citizens became Irish, if only for a day, as they celebrate St. Patrick’s Day.

Interestingly, you may be more likely to find an authentic, historical version of cultural traditions and celebrations taking place in those locations where ethnic populations have immigrated to, than in their original homelands. The reason being, that those who left continue celebrating and holding fast to what they remember, while those who stayed behind now celebrate who they are and who they have become today. In either case, it is that which we perceive to be our identities that we celebrate.

Today, the world is flat. What took our ancestors 150,000 years, we can do in seconds. With the speed and capabilities available today via travel, technology, the internet and the media, the speed at which ideas, images and information travel have reconfigured the world as we know it. Investors in one part of the world work with manufacturers in another; educators in the west exchange with counterparts in the east; trade routes for all industries crisscross like global spider webs; and the “middle of nowhere” no longer is. Virtually every continent on our planet is becoming a melting pot of international diversity and the new moniker for successful businesses and events, worldwide, is “international”.

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The Growth and Changing Face of Our Industry

As far back as celebration and events can be traced, it is only in relatively recent history that this growing and vital industry that we share has come to be recognized as such, leaving behind the days of “spare time” event marketing and management.

Over time, celebrations themselves have changed; from often informal affairs to spectacular productions, requiring new sets of skills, experience, creativity, financing, planning and leadership. As a result, celebration has evolved into a business and an industry, with new demands and challenges every day.

The Growth of Education Programs

Educational programs have grown and prospered to support and further that industry. From professional certification programs, like the “CFEE” (certified festivals & events executive) program offered through the ifea – a program that we are working with our international affiliates on to ensure that the required curriculum courses, electives, experience and fees match regional realities; to formalized college and university programs – there are now over 300 institutions of higher learning offering courses, certificates or degrees in events education worldwide, supported by an ever-growing library of resources and research.

As we move forward there will be a natural and expanding need for an even closer alliance between the professional industry itself and the research capabilities that the academic world brings to the table. The ifea has committed itself to bringing that alliance much closer together in the years ahead, through regular and enhanced communication channels, clearer definition of research needs, and increased opportunities for sharing and using the results of those efforts.

The Role of the IFEA – Building an International Network of Creativity

At the same time professional associations, like the International Festivals & Events Association (IFEA), have grown and responded in support of our changing and dynamic industry. And while we remain respectively much younger than the industry itself, the IFEA recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of our event leadership role in 2005. We will mark 54 years in September of 2009.

From small beginnings to simply share ideas, today the IFEA represents a true global industry, including IFEA Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North America. Today’s IFEA members understand, as did our founders 54 years ago, the enormous value and power created through an international network of professional peers, for the purpose of sharing ideas, successes, and creative new solutions.

They have learned that there will always be challenges, and that the difference between success and failure lies in those who are prepared to meet them. Those who have invested in their success through a strategy of continued education, experience and evaluation. Those who have honed their skills, built new networks and relationships, and strengthened existing partnerships.

And as we continue to evolve as an industry, so too will the professional credibility and public awareness of our field, enabling us to create a strong and positive brand identity for our “industry community” with the media, sponsors, government entities, audiences and other groups critical to our success.

Building Our Global Identities

One of our primary opportunities, I believe, as we look to the future together, will be to use our industry to help bring our world closer together, to share our global identities with each other. Using festivals & events as our vehicle, we have the unique capability to educate, communicate and provide new experiences to our audiences in a non-threatening

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environment that naturally brings people closer together (from which the possible ripple effect should not be underestimated).

On the other hand, one of our larger challenges will be, in a world where our identities have always been such a deep rooted part of who we are, to define just who we want to be, as we all continue to blend together. I was hard pressed for an answer several months ago when someone asked me what the “European identity” was overseas. As I thought about it, I realized that there really is no such thing; anymore than there is a Middle Eastern identity, African identity, Asian identity, American identity, or others. What we often mistake for an “identifier” is more than likely a stereotyping expectation – with most not flattering, some humorous, and the large majority based upon a true lack of exposure or preconceived prejudices. Certainly there are differences in our uses of language, fashion, humor, political opinion, even how we learn, but even in one community or country or office or school, you will find many variations of these same “identifiers”, so it is very hard, in my mind, to justifiably declare them as representative traits or identifiers of an entire continent, country, or global region.

I spent many years of my early career with the international, educational, and musical program, up with people. Their mission was to help build bridges of understanding between people around the world. The founder of up with people, a man named J. Blanton Belk, taught me many important lessons. Among them he encouraged that, wherever you go, to go with an approach of ‘appreciation’ vs. ‘comparison’; appreciate and learn from our differences (and our commonalities) and don’t just compare why things aren’t done the way you do them where you come from.

He also encouraged that, wherever you go, to make places, people. So when I think of all the many special places that make up our planet, I don’t think of a border on a map. I think of all of the friends that I have met during my travels and my career. Having those personal connections and friends, around the world, makes it much harder to be judgmental or to lean toward aggressive responses, as people or as countries; and, in fact, places an unwritten obligation upon us to be there for our friends – both current and future.

I believe that our events and our industry have that same power to bring people together to appreciate our differences and commonalities; to serve as our truest “identifiers”; to celebrate what is right with the world. I believe that we carry an unstated responsibility on our shoulders that we are just starting to clearly recognize; one that has always been there, but that we have come to understand better over time.

In a meeting with the former minister of culture for china, we acknowledged, together, that it is unlikely that anyone will change another’s politics, religious beliefs or point of view if that is their goal; but by first building friendships and respect for one another, all ideas are more openly received.

The Challenges We Face

Among our other challenges, as we look to the future, will be to protect and celebrate our very important roots and heritages, so that they do not disappear, while at the same time building new events, new traditions and new identities that reflect our changing world and communities.

On the first front, I encourage everyone in our mutual industry to celebrate your past with pride. Use your “calling card” to tell people who you are; what makes you different and special. That is what draws audiences and creates images. Too many people want to be what someone else is. With all of the communities globally who celebrate some version of Mardi Gras or Oktoberfest, they are simply imitating New Orleans or Munich. Instead of “imitating” someone else’s originality, we must find what it is that makes each of us who we are and emphasize that –maybe it’s a historical event (such as the building of the titanic in Belfast, Northern Ireland) or a waterfront location; an iconic setting, such as the pyramids in Egypt; a product that is produced or grown locally (tulip festivals in the Netherlands or mud in Boryeong, South Korea); a famous person, musical style, or food that was born or originated there (Salzburg, Austria did a great job of promoting Mozart’s 250th birthday and Gilroy, California celebrates all things garlic each year); a seasonal salute (Winterlude in

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Canada or the Iditarod in Alaska); celebrating our heritage and customs; or perhaps it is something as simple as family values. Whatever it is, we must be original, be creative and be ourselves. People don't travel to Dubai to get authentic Chinese food or go to the Basque regions of Spain to experience the roots of jazz or come to the United States looking for a good Brazilian-style carnival. They come to experience those places for their unique traits and customs that stand them apart from other places.

Walt Disney reminded us that "Today, we are the shapers of the world of tomorrow," and we must not forget that. When it comes to building new events, traditions and legacies, we must do our part to build new identities that celebrate both our differences and our similarities. We, as an industry, can set the example for others as we bond our new communities together.

We all get judged on first impressions and for those lucky enough to gain the attention of audiences that have made their way through the sometimes daunting gauntlet of negative media coverage, political fallout, and other organized points of view that often fall far short of the image that we would all like others to have of our communities, our cities and our countries, we certainly want to leave them with a positive and lasting memory.

China, in 2008, hosted the Olympic games, and despite a number of challenges, demonstrated the most extensive and successful effort ever undertaken to re-introduce their country to the rest of the world (they effectively set a new standard for the Olympic games) and the high quality festivals and events of our industry have that same opportunity, every day, to help create lasting global identities and new visions for our communities and countries.

I believe that we are up to these challenges; but to do so, our first and most important challenge (and opportunity) will be our ability to unite our industry, globally, creating our own industry identity.

The road from vision to reality will require us to succeed at something many others have struggled to do throughout history. We must form a global partnership of cooperation and communication in all directions. A partnership that crosses all barriers, assumptions, beliefs and tendencies that we may have about the world around us, and allows us to see each other as a true global network of our peers, and an unlimited source of creativity and support.

Further, we must commit to our own personal use of and ongoing support of this global network, to ensure its success.

Our industry often talks about the power of our events to bring people together; now we must show that we are capable of doing that among ourselves professionally.

Global Opportunities

Each year at the IFEA annual world convention we feature a global panel session that looks ahead at the future for our industry. On that panel are professional representatives from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and North America. There are no egos, no discussions about what shape the table should be or who can sit beside whom, and no hesitations about sharing viewpoints that may benefit us all. It is a shining example of what we can build and a reminder of the many lives that we can touch as a result.

Our time is now, but it will take all of us, together, to accomplish our grandest visions. Whether you play your role on a local level or on a global scale, it is no less important, as each life and each community that we touch as an industry adds to our outreach; each quality event adds to the brand and image of our industry; and each volunteer, student or staff member that we mentor builds our future leaders.

Like a plate-spinning busker, we must start each plate turning one at a time, and then continue moving forward, opening up new doors, doing new things, and adding new plates with the courage that is required to become familiar with the sometimes unfamiliar, until we have created a unified global industry at every level.

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We must see ourselves as more than simply another name in an organizational directory of individuals who happen to be employed in the same field. We must clearly understand how we are all connected, our personal role in that connection, and the exponential possibilities that those connections hold for us all, both individually and collectively. And we must harness the power of our relationships and direct it in such a way that the world, our events, and each one of us will be changed for the better through our efforts.

It is a grand dream, but extraordinary visions are not accomplished through small dreams. If all the employees of a company were to align behind one dream, imagine the possibilities. If all of your own festival or event staff, boards, volunteers, sponsors, media and others aligned behind one dream, imagine the possibilities within your community. And if an entire global industry were to see itself as one and align itself behind the dream of touching the world in a positive way through celebration, imagine the possibilities.

From the earliest migrations out of Africa to today and continuing well into the changing future ahead of us, we are the industry that must ensure that the world does not lose touch with itself.

The same flattening of the world that has changed our challenges has also opened up many new opportunities. The new possibilities for exchanging ideas, entertainment, traditions and experiences, worldwide, will be reflected in how we think and operate; in the events that we produce; in where we seek funding and support; in how and where we market and promote our events; and in the relationships that we establish and enjoy. That is the great exponential value of the ifea global network and there are many benefits, resources, connections, creative ideas and professional opportunities to be accessed, in many formats, if we simply commit ourselves to using them; resources that will continue to grow along with our professionalism, credibility, successes and industry brand.

I encourage each of you to maximize every opportunity that you are provided – even those sometimes well-hidden behind the crisis du jour. Start building new friendships, professional partnerships and international relationships. Because, in the end, whether you play your role on a local level or a global scale, these will be the building blocks of our future successes. And each life that we touch as an industry adds to our outreach and legacy.

The famous Chinese warrior and philosopher Sun Tzu talked of the use of gongs, drums, fires, banners and flags (sounds like an event to me) to achieve a single visual and audible point of focus for his army. Having succeeded at that, the army could act as a single body, and it was impossible for anyone to advance or retreat alone. That same analogy can be made for the use of festivals and events as they bond together communities, cities, countries and peoples. Such is the power of spirit and celebration and such can be the power that we create by working together as a common industry.

Mahatma Gandhi advised us that “when we make others happy, we too gain happiness.” He also noted that “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides, and my windows closed. Instead, I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible.” I am confident that ours is the industry that can provide both the breeze to carry our global cultures, as well as a large share of happiness to the world around us.