



By Jacquie Warda

Whether your show is small, medium or large, a budget is essential to the success of your event. You budget for all the things you will need to run your show: fencing, porta potties, security, hotels, cars, fuel, smoke oil, and – of course – performers, both in the air and on the ground.

Most air shows will have a set amount of money allocated for all these things. I am a performer, so my interest is in that line item of your budget. Most shows will decide to pay the vendor who can deliver the goods at a price that is within the budget set for that item. Probably not a lot of “dickering” done over the price for a lot of these fixed items.

When the air show budget is planned, are the performers listed by price first or by type of act? For example, does your show say that they want three performers at \$1,500, one performer at \$2,500 and one performer at \$3,000? Or is it more likely that you express an interest in hiring one comedy act, one ground act, one mono-plane flip-flopper, one biplane, one aerobatic warbird act, and one wing-walker? Is their full price in the next column, added up and used as the budget amount for performers?

No show would ever say that they need \$5,000 worth of fencing and then find out that \$5,000 worth of fencing only covers half their airport area. Most organizers would

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probably measure how much fencing they need, find out how much that costs, search vendors for price and availability and then find the vendor who can deliver the fencing needed for the price allocated.

By the same token, would it be practical to say, “I have \$10,000 for performers, now I need five performers, but not just any performers? I want the best ones out there. And the best ones out there will cost me \$20,000 if I pay them their fee as published or stated up front.”

Very often, organizers are willing to pay the fencing vendor his fee and the smoke oil provider his fee. But when they get to the performers, they talk to each one they want to hire, and, when they hear what the fee is, say something like, “Well, what is your BEST price to fly our show?”

So, immediately the performer knows the

organizer doesn’t want to pay the fee that performer needs, but rather they want the performer to discount his/her fee. They want the performer to fly their show, but they don’t want to pay the established fee.

There are many factors at play here. The organizer may think the performer will discount the fee simply because performers love to fly/perform, or the organizer may not understand the costs related to operating an air show aircraft. Or perhaps the organizer does not understand that the performer is a business like any other. The person doing the hiring for the show may even believe that the performer is not worth the performance fee that he/she has quoted.

A good deal is a good deal for EVERYONE. The scenario described above fits into the category of, “It’s a good deal ONLY for the air show organizer, not BOTH the performer and the show organizer.” How can this be a good thing for our business, or any business trying to make a profit and stay in the game? Organizations that set their goals, set their budgets, and stick to those parameters will most likely show a profit each year and continue to succeed year after year. That’s how a good business is run. But when only one side of the deal profits and the other side goes broke, the industry will eventually go bust when you have nothing but buyers and no sellers.

Air show performers set their budgets just like organizers do. We know what it costs to

operate our airplanes. We know what it costs to travel to and from shows. We know what we need to charge in order to “stay in the game” and make a profit at the end of the year. When we don’t get our fee paid for each show, we end up in the red at the end of the year, and that is not a business model that can be sustained very long.

It seems to me that, in order for the air show industry to thrive and be able to grow, every player in our industry needs to make money to be a part of the success of the industry. Every player needs to be part of the solution. We all need to care about every other player in our industry and do our utmost to make sure they succeed. If the fencing vendors don’t make any profit, they will close their doors. There may come a day when air show organizers can’t find a suitable fence vendor to hire. The air show will suffer. Indeed, all air shows will be negatively impacted. Likewise, if performers operate at a loss each year, they, too, will fold their tent, sell their airplane, and go back to finding a “regular” job. When this happens, the air show industry suffers as a whole.

Everybody in the air show business needs to run their business in a profitable manner, or at least not at a loss. Not just some of us; all of us.

As an organizer, when you create your budget, don’t get to the performer line item and say, “We’ll cut this line in half to save money and work harder to get those pilots to lower their fees because we know they will.” Instead, look at every line item in your budget, raise the money to support your entire budget, and pay everybody fairly. Create a realistic budget for your show and stick to that budget. Don’t ask your performers to work for a portion of their fee simply because you want more than you can afford. A realistic budget

will include a fair price for every line item listed.

Everybody in the air show business needs to run their business in a profitable manner, or at least not at a loss. Not just some of us; all of us. If we don’t, there is only one thing that can happen. And if we don’t help each other become successful, we will all suffer. We need more event organizers collaborating and sharing “best practices” and “lessons learned.” We need vendors to offer the highest quality products they can at a fair profit. We need performers helping other performers more by mentoring without being begged to do so, and without fear the new guy may become more successful than you. We need to manage and grow our business from a position of strength rather than weakness. If any of us think we can succeed by stepping on some other little guy, not only are we wrong, but we weaken our industry.

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