

Visions in Leisure and Business

Volume 3 | Number 4

Article 12

1985

The Future of World's Fairs: A Primer for Planning a Success

Jack B. Samuels
Montclair State College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions>

Recommended Citation

Samuels, Jack B. (1985) "The Future of World's Fairs: A Primer for Planning a Success," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 3 : No. 4 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol3/iss4/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Visions in Leisure and Business by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

THE FUTURE OF WORLD'S FAIRS: A PRIMER FOR PLANNING A SUCCESS

BY

DR. JACK B. SAMUELS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION AND LEISURE
MONTCLAIR STATE COLLEGE
UPPER MONTCLAIR, NEW JERSEY 07043

ABSTRACT

The history of world's fairs contain both success and failure stories. The role of world's fairs has shifted from more of a technical to an educational, cultural event. The key elements to success in the future are astute managers and creative themes with an entertainment focus.

THE FUTURE OF WORLD'S FAIRS: A PRIMER FOR PLANNING A SUCCESS

There is no doubt about it, world's fairs of the future can be a success. All special events including such Herculean undertakings as the Olympics could be viewed as a success or a failure in the future. The success or failure of such events largely depends on the managerial and marketing skill of those who are chosen to run them as well as the judgment of the public(s) who sponsor such events.

Success or failure is a highly subjective judgment in regard to world's fairs. The reason for this is that success in our society and many others is frequently judged by the bottom line; i.e. how much of a monetary profit or loss is incurred on the event. In the case of the world's fair the making of a profit on the event itself is probably not the most important element in terms of judging success.

Success in regard to world's fairs and other world class special events should basically be judged and historically appears to have been judged on three different planes:

1. The ability of the event to provide long lasting economic and social and structural benefits for the region which hosts it.
2. The ability of the event to be enjoyed by the public which

attends it or simply the "success of the show."

3. The profitability of the event.

It is likely that if the event achieves item number one and two and shows even a moderate amount of red ink the event may still be termed a success. World class special events can contribute greatly to an areas economy via such items as sales and tourist taxes. Consequently, although the bottom line for sponsoring private or public interest corporation of any world class special event may show red ink the sponsoring region's economy may be so greatly boosted that a small loss on the event itself could be termed inconsequential. Additionally, any monetary losses are further offset by an infrastructure or buildings which are left for use after the event closes.

WHY SHOULD WE DO THIS?

The reason(s) for sponsoring a world class special event in any given region probably seals the fate of the event far in advance of the actual occurrence of the event. If the reasons for having such an event are appropriate to the region's needs the odds are that the event will be a success.

The reason which appears to be the cornerstone of a foundation for a successful world's fair appears to be urban renewal or long term improvement of the quality of life in the host region. Many urban planners and historians seem to agree that this is the main purpose for hosting such an event. This was not always the case. World's fairs used to be staged to present new inventions and daring new ideas.(7) Olympic games were mostly hosted to build civic pride.

Starting in 1962, however, with the Seattle World's Fair a trend towards the utilization of world's fairs as an urban redevelopment tool apparently began.(7) The primary purpose of the Knoxville World's Fair was to revitalize a 72 acre area in downtown Knoxville and the New Orleans Fair's main purpose was to help revitalize run down areas of that city. Olympic games, particularly in the United States, have also been utilized for structural renewal. An excellent example of the latter was the 1980 Winter Games at Lake Placid which gave birth to the Olympic Regional Development Authority which was still in existence in 1985, five years after the games took place.

It is clear that due to their mammoth costs world class special events should not be held in any region unless the region will receive permanent benefits which physically enhance the attractiveness of the region. The next question is: how great do these benefits have to be? It is difficult to state how great the benefits should be, but there appears to be some simple rules which should be followed:

1. Clearly outline the benefits of holding the event to all publics who support it.
2. Carefully project the benefits of holding the event and be certain that any projected benefits will be forthcoming upon the

completion of the event.

3. Keep monetary losses on the event proportionate to the benefits which will accrue to the sponsoring region.

In addition to considering what permanent regional development will result from the holding of a world class special event there are other reasons for holding such an event which should be considered prior to the finalization of any plans for such an event. These additional reasons do not appear to have the pivotal importance of the previously discussed item. They do, however, appear to have a contributory influence over the ultimate success of such an event. It is also important to realize that if too much emphasis is placed on any one of these other reasons to hold a world class special event there appears to be a higher propensity for the event to fail. In other words, it is apparently important that the issue of redevelopment and similar matters always be given the greatest amount of consideration rather than any of the yet to be discussed reasons for holding such an event.

The additional reasons for hosting a world class special event in a region are varied in nature. They include:

1. Utilizing world's fairs as a vehicle to increase international trade.
2. Putting on an event which will foster civic pride and be a once in a lifetime memorable special event for the local people.
3. Governmental support.
4. Being a vehicle for improving tourism.

Utilizing world's fairs as a vehicle for foreign trade is not a reason unto itself to hold a world's fair. An important element of Expo 67 in Montreal was to act as a center to stimulate foreign trade. This element, however, was minor in comparison to the other benefits which the city received from hosting the Expo. In 1968 the planners of Hemisphere the world's fair which was staged in San Antonio overemphasized the idea of utilizing the fair as a catalyst for foreign trade and consequently the fair did not have the pizzazz to make it a success. The fair lost \$7.5 million.

Putting an event on which will foster civic pride sounds like a noble idea. Now that even a small world's fair appears to cost more than \$300 million to stage the idea of utilizing a world's fair simply for this purpose appears to be passe.(6)

Governmental support is a definite plus if you are going to hold a world's fair. Even in the United States where world's fairs are generally staged by private corporations (formed in such a way that they will benefit the public good if the fair is a success) there always must be some governmental funding if the fair is to be a success. This may come in the form of federal, state and local grants to the private corporation. In light of the apparent need for governmental funding the idea of the totally privately funded or even privately organized fair may actually be a thing of the past. The United States is the only country

where recent fairs have been privately financed. Expo 67 and Expo 86 in Canada were financed by the Canadian government and the two most recent Expos in Japan (70 & 85) were funded by the Japanese government. The bottom line is that unless substantial governmental funding is available a world's fair may not be in the offing.

A world's fair or any world class special event will not necessarily boost tourism in the long run. A world's fair may cause an improvement in tourism in the long run, but this is not assured either. If you can not come relatively close to supporting a fair with people within a 250 mile radius of it it appears that you are likely to have a failure. The Knoxville fair drew the expected amount of people, but this was because the fair was very popular with the local people. Tourism in the region was down greatly largely because of weak domestic travel during the summer of 1982 and the fear that the visitor would face overcrowding and high prices. The New Orleans Fair's planners relied heavily on a projection of tourists in the planning of their fair only to find out that the projection was wrong. That fair left New Orleans with a bad image and the fair corporation went bankrupt.(4)

Even if your region has a large parcel of land which needs urban renewal and you have government funding and several other good reasons for having a world's fair or other world class special event this does not mean that your event will be a success. You now face a varied list of factors which need to be carefully examined in order to make the event a success.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUCCESS OF THE WORLD'S FAIR AND OTHER WORLD CLASS EVENTS

THE NEED FOR MANAGERIAL EXCELLENCE

Recreation and tourism related businesses can frequently be successful with a limited amount of managerial finesse. In order to successfully stage a world's fair or other world class event, however, there appears to be a greater need for managerial excellence and an understanding of the factors which affect the success of such events. Jennifer Alter aptly summarizes the operational environment which the managers of world's fairs face:

"Staging a world's fair is in many ways akin to running a business ... but there also is an immediacy that compresses tasks into limited time periods, coloring decisions with an underlying sense of urgency. Contrary to operations with the leisure to experiment with strategy, execution, and diversification ... the world's fair must be ready to go. And unlike businesses which may have good and bad years the world's fair has only one chance to lure customers; either they show up in droves or the fair is a flop."(1)

There simply is no time for mistakes in planning a world's fair or other world class event. Therefore, the most significant factor which can contribute to the success of a world class special event is the proper selection of a managerial team which can successfully complete the job. Many world class special events have failed due to simple managerial errors. The people selected must be highly experienced and/or knowledgeable about the marketing and management of special events, mass gatherings, auditoriums, arenas, stadiums and theme parks. They must be able to control expenses by the creative utilization of existing facilities and clearly understand the tourism characteristics of the host region. They must be willing to put in sixty hour work weeks for at least two years of their lives and be committed to a successful project from start to finish like their careers and reputations depend upon it. Creative thinkers are a necessity. The sponsoring organization(s) must be committed to obtaining the best talents available from all walks of life or else it is likely that any success will be little more than a lucky break.

PLANNING THE SHOW

There are a number of important factors and ideas to carefully consider when planning a world class special event which can influence the probability for success. These include such items as:

1. The overall size and scope of the fair/event
2. Sponsorships
3. Theme selection/showmanship
4. The design of the physical plant
5. The capability of support services

There are basically two different types of world's fairs as designated by the Bureau of International Expositions located in Paris, France. These are class I and class II. The class one shows are sometimes commonly referred to as "megafairs" or "universal class expositions." These fairs have their pavilions built by the countries which occupy them and usually have broad, all encompassing themes. They are generally very large. Such fairs today probably cost in the vicinity of one billion dollars to stage. The proposed Columbian Exposition for Chicago in 1992 would be such a "megafair". The last previously held such fair in North America was Expo 67 in Montreal. All of the fairs held in the United States in the past twenty-five years which were sanctioned by the Bureau of International Expositions have been class II fairs. These fairs have their pavilions built by the fairs sponsors and then the space in these pavilions are rented to the exhibitors. The fairs generally have focused themes such as the Knoxville fair which utilized an energy theme.(6)

In a world full of an increasing number of theme parks it is possible that only the class I type fair has a good chance of being a success. It is possible that class II fairs are passe since they are

simply not spectacular enough to draw large crowds or attract big sponsors. It is believed, however, that if the class II fair is structured and marketed properly it can be a success.

As previously stated, the sponsorship of a world class special event by a governmental body is probably a very strong reason for holding such an event in any given region or country. The dimensions of sponsorship, however do not stop with the reigning government(s). When trying to host an Olympic Games it is imperative to receive sponsorship of the World Olympic Organizing Committee. In the case of world's fairs the sponsorship of the Bureau of International Expositions is not required but it has been shown to be essential. When the 1964-65 New York World's Fair failed to obtain the sponsorship of the Bureau it also failed to gain the attention of most foreign governments and largely became a showcase for American industry rather than a true world's fair. The fair lost a great deal of attractiveness and failed to meet its attendance projections by almost 20 million people.(2)

In addition to world class event sanctioning bodies world class special events clearly need strong private sponsorship particularly when governmental sponsorship is weak. The benefits of strong industrial sponsorship were clearly reaped by the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee with the 1984 Summer Olympics and the techniques that were utilized by the management of these games should set an example for all sponsors of world class special events.

The theme selection and general nature of the show presented is critical to the success of all world's fairs. In the case of class II fairs the selection of an interesting theme is essential. The Knoxville fair experienced a good deal of difficulty with its energy theme. This theme was clearly outdated by the time the show actually took place and was also dull and uninteresting. The phrase that was commonly heard was "when you've seen one model coal mine or nuclear power plant you've seen them all." The theme in itself must be interesting and must be something which potential exhibitors can flexibly use as a framework for developing varied displays.

It may be advisable for world's fairs to rely more on entertainment and cultural programming than exhibit pavilions. The spectacular pavilions of the 1964-65 New York World's Fair did not make it an overwhelming success. The dramatic pavilions which occupy Disney's EPCOT Center (largely a permanent world's fair) do not appear to have the power to give this facility longevity. Since the opening of the EPCOT Center Disney has greatly stepped up its entertainment offerings in EPCOT. It has increased street performers, offered an elaborate world festival entertainment program, and developed a spectacular laser/pyrotechnics show which is staged over the large man-made World Showcase lagoon. Entertainment and cultural programming is more cost efficient than expensive pavilions with costly interiors and exhibits. World's Fairs should develop unique and spectacular entertainment and cultural programming. This should include a mix of daily spectacular street parades, stage presentations, and outdoor sound and light shows at night.

Another feature which appears to be very significant for world's fairs appears to be their ability to obtain some art treasures for display. The attractiveness of Michaelangelo's Pieta during the 1964-65

world's fair was astounding. We also saw just how significant a drawing card art treasurers could be when the King Tut exhibit toured the United States in the late 1970's.

Shopping is undertouted as a tourist attraction. The significance of shopping as an attraction at world's fairs has not been given full consideration. Shopping was a strong attraction at Expo 67 in Montreal.(3) The Chinese Pavilion at the Knoxville Fair proved to be the most popular pavilion and it was little more than a shopping mall for goods made in China. An exciting idea for a world's fair would be to make the fair into a free trade zone where visitors could purchase goods from all over the world at greatly reduced costs. Perhaps an additional touch would be to have a percentage of the proceeds donated to selected world class charities. It is possible that a great theme for a world's fair might be Wares of the World!

The design of the physical plant for a world's fair or other world class special event is another item which can sometimes be a factor which contributes to the success or failure of such events. The utilization of existing facilities and the modernization of old facilities for the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles can be cited as major contributors to the success of this event. In an age of spiraling construction costs it appears that we will never see and should never see an event which builds spectacular buildings (like the New York Fair in 1964-65) and demolishes almost all of them after only a very short period of time.

Support services can not be overlooked by the planner of any world class special event. The availability of adequate lodging facilities has been a problem for many of these events. A housing bureau should be established early and in many cases the pricing and quality of lodging must be carefully monitored. All support areas including roadways, parking facilities and mass transit must be adequate if the event is to be totally successful.

MARKETING FACTORS

There are several basic factors involving the marketing of world's fairs and other world class events which must be understood if the event is to be successful. These include factors relating to the:

1. The "class" of the fair
2. The tourist market
3. The local market
4. Sponsoring and cooperating corporations and organizations

One of the problems which has impacted the marketing of recent world's fairs in the United States is that the public does not understand the difference between a universal type world's fair (Expo 67 and to a lesser degree New York 64-65) and a class II (San Antonio, Knoxville, New Orleans). It appears that many people returned from the Knoxville fair and the New Orleans fair very disappointed. This was because they compared them to the Montreal and New York fairs which were fairs that were intended to be on a much grander scale than the Knoxville and New Orleans shows. There has been apparent consumer confusion over the types

of world's fairs. The flow of information regarding this matter needs to be improved so this confusion can be avoided in the future.

It is difficult to predict how many tourists will actually visit a world's fair. The number of foreign visitors is usually small with the notable exception fo Expo 67 which had about half of its visitors come from the United States.(2) The New Orleans fair lost money largely because of a severe misprojection in regard to the number of tourists which would visit New Orleans during the year of the fair.(4) It is probably not wise to rely heavily on tourists as attendees to world's fairs. This is because tourism is privy to such unpredictable factors as changes in the economy and consumer interest coupled with the fact that world's fairs are planned many years in advance of the period of time in which they will occur.

It appears that the attractiveness of any region for a world class special event is curtailed by the special event. This effect has been repeatedly apparent during many of these events. Tourists appear to stay away from a region because one of these events is being held in the region. Unless the event itself is truly spectacular enough to counter the negative influences (such as high lodging prices and overcrowding) which these events seem to bestow on their host region than it is wise to assume that the event will not increase tourism.

Assuming that there is a market to be had for any world class special event, the event must be promoted well in advance if a substantial number of people are to become interested in and make the necessary plans to attend the event. New Orleans does not seem to understand that promotion is essential for all tourism let alone world class special events.(5) Any organizing committee that does not follow the promotional recommendations of the management that it hires can definitely be making an uncorrectable mistake.

Since regional public support seems to be essential for the hosting of any world class special event the event should not be staged unless the public clearly supports it. Perhaps all such events should only be staged after a vote has been taken on them. After the public has been sold on the idea it then becomes most important that the people in the region are encouraged to attend the event as much as possible, particularly in the case of world's fairs. This should be promulgated by extensive promotional campaigns tied in to virtually every major regional business and organization as well as a variety of promotional ticketing schemes available only to people who live in the region.

The importance of the continuing entertainment value of a world's fair can not be understated in regard to drawing visitors from the region surrounding the event. The events entertainment program, dining, and shopping facilities are of paramount importance to building repeat visitors.

Perhaps the foundation of the marketing effort for any world class special event is the procurement of sponsors far in advance of the event. Sponsors should be solicited and secured at least two years prior to the holding of the event. This will give them maximum amounts of time to utilize their association(s) with the event for promotional purposes. Both commercial and private not for profit sponsors should be solicited.

Some sponsors such as youth organizations might not contribute greatly to the events financial coffers at first, but these groups may provide many visitors to the event thusly providing revenues once the event gets underway.

The development of creative and extensive plans to utilize sponsors is essential to the success of any world class special event. The events marketing staff should work closely with the sponsors to show them creative ways in which they can utilize an association with the event to their benefit.

The planning of any world class special event as illustrated herein is a challenging task. With the magic of the human imagination, dedicated managers and public support these events can be successful. More importantly these events add that something special to the lifetimes of millions of people. Do you still remember your last visit to a world's fair?

REFERENCES

1. J. Alter, Marketers Feel Urgency as Knoxville Fair Nears, Advertising Age , November 30, p. 3, 1981.
2. Anonymous, Trying to Make a Hit Out of a World's Fair Seventy Nations Sign for Montreal's Expo 67, Business Week , August 30, pp. 86-87, 1966.
3. Anonymous, World's Fair Closes Its Gates, Business Week , October 28, pp.40-42, 1967.
4. R. Cawthon, New Orleans Sings the Blues After Its World's Fair Fiasco, The Atlanta Journal and Constitution April 7, p. 28a, 1985.
5. -----, City of Jazz Struggles to Reach High Note in Slumping Tourism Trade, Atlanta Journal and Constitution , April 7, p. 28a, 1985.
6. C. E. Curtis, Meet Me Where?, Forbes , January 4, pp. 44-46, 1982.
7. J. McQuaid, Financial Failures of World's Fairs Causing the U.S. to Study a New Format, Newhouse News Service, The Newark Star Ledger , November 18, p. 72, 1984.