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By: Mary Burdette, Assistant Director, Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival

A few months ago, the 1st Annual International Music Festival Conference (IMFCON) was held in Las Vegas, Nevada, with two of us from Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival attending. The topics and speakers were intriguing enough to prompt us to take a chance and go. Taking chances, after all, is what Las Vegas is all about! And we're happy to report that we weren't disappointed in the least. The mission of IMFCON is "to promote and strengthen the global music festival industry through education, networking, dissemination of information and the cultivation of high standards for the industry," all of which fit well with the goals of IBMA. IMFCON is modeled after the International Film Festival Conference (IFFC), which took place at the same time in Las Vegas. In fact, our social activities were held together, giving the music and film people time to interact.

About 100 music festival professionals and entertainment executives, mostly from the United States and Canada, gathered in one room for two days to discuss the issues that face our industry today. We networked, learned from one another, established relationships and discussed the latest trends in the music festival business. This small, intimate setting was a perfect opportunity for us to think outside the bluegrass box and to learn from executives from the world of jazz, rock, blues, world, classical and pop music. It was also an opportunity for others to get acquainted with and learn from the world of bluegrass. Each day, times were built in for socializing in the Exhibit Hall with exhibitors, participants and speakers from both conferences.

Sessions consisted of a series of panel discussions arranged linearly, making it possible for everyone to attend all sessions. Topics on the first day included "The Future of Music Festivals," led by Dave Margulies, Director of High Sierra Music Festival; "Creating Value for Sponsors and Supporters," moderated by Jack Walsh, Executive Producer of Celebrate Brooklyn Performing Arts Festival; "Marketing Strategies," led by Jeff White, Vice President of In Ticketing; "Building Community Outreach," moderated by Howard Sapper, CEO of Harmony Festival; and "Ticketing Potential," led by Paul Jamieson of Sunfest.

Day two's sessions included "Programming: Talent Selection & More," led by Paul Jamieson; "Accessibility," presented by Laura Grunfeld, founder/owner of Everyone's Invited; "Technology: A New Media Experience," led by Dave Rosenhein, CEO of Jambase; and "Operations & Execution for a Dynamite Fest," moderated by Josh Berman, Owner of Mountain Groove Productions. In order to go into detail in a few key areas, I'll share with you several points made during the opening discussion on "The Future of Music Festivals," in which the following trends, predictions, observations and suggestions were presented:

1. A trend toward: more and more large events cropping up; for the festival landscape to be nearing the point of saturation; for small festivals to be hit hardest by the current economy slump and for them to be left behind in terms of sponsorship money unless they are particularly creative; and for the possibility of some discretionary spending in 2010 as the festival season approaches.
2. The most successful festivals will be the ones doing things NOT being done by others, for example: artist development; unique branding beyond the festival itself; developing ways of engaging the fan year round; using social media to keep fans involved and a healthy buzz going; fostering the sense of community during the festival; asking fans what they think and thanking them for their input, etc. All of these practices help to develop that "niche community" that so many people are seeking these days. They also suggested getting die-hard fans who are really into the music to invite their friends to attend a festival with them.
3. Other suggestions included using artists on the festival's lineup to co-promote the event: requiring artists to promote your event on their web sites, MySpace, Facebook and other social media pages; and involving the artists in helping to unveil the event's line-up, etc. Some festivals are incorporating these types of promotional requirements into their artist contracts.
4. Panelists also noted a trend toward pairing music with other forms of art and entertainment such as dance, art installations, wine or beer tasting, food competitions, comedy, green powered activities and so on.

Presenters of the seminar on "Marketing Strategies that Work" stressed the need to engage your fans, emphasizing that our web sites are our festivals for 51 weeks of the year. They agreed that shotgun marketing does not work, and that we need to know our core group and market to that group. We also need to embrace the fact that the convergence of music devices, mobile devices and social media is the future of communication and marketing. Communication via Google, Facebook and Twitter is growing exponentially. Some festivals (Bonnaroo, Monterey Jazz, etc.) already have iPhone apps that contain the schedule, maps, ticketing information and updates. Street teams are another effective marketing tool. And some festivals are rewarding their artists when they sell a certain number of tickets for that event. The bottom line for every presenter was, "Know your core group; hear them; serve them."

Presenters of the "Building Community Outreach" discussion suggested that festival organizers look into their communities to see what is most needed. If hunger is a problem, get involved with a local food bank. If intolerance is an issue, create a model of diversity. Perhaps provide vendor space to non-profit organizations that deal with local problems. Ask non-profits to send out emails promoting the event. Get additional press coverage by working with charitable community projects. Panelists agreed that the collaborative process is the model of the future.

It was an eye-opening experience to hear what music festivals of all kinds all over the United States are doing to promote and improve their events. From marketing and community outreach to social media networking and accessibility—and everything in between—we certainly came home with exciting new contacts, creative ideas and practical tools for the future.

The 1st European IMFCON will be held April 8-9, 2010 in Amsterdam, NL. While the topics will be similar to the December conference, an exceptional roster of professionals has been assembled to address issues specific to the European music festival industry. The next IMFCON in the U.S. is scheduled for December 2010 in Las Vegas. For further information or to register for either of these events, visit www.imfcon.com [2].

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