

EVENTS | STU KATZEN



SAFETY FIRST

Ensuring the safety of your event attendees doesn't mean that your programs have to be bland, says Stu Katzen.

We live in a world dominated by fear. Everyone is so fearful of what could go wrong that we spend a fortune in public liability, workers' comp and personal and professional indemnity insurance, trying to insure ourselves against loss, breakage and litigation.

When we hire equipment from some suppliers we pay a damage waiver and now we also pay a percentage of their public liability. When we go into some venues, they have specific rigging or AV companies we have to use – "because they understand the space".

Fear of loss, damage and litigation has inspired some to institute exclusive use contracts and preferred suppliers resulting in higher event costs.

However, having said this, our industry has come a long way in the last 15 years as far as safety goes. You will no longer arrive to find a three phase distro in a change room in 5mm of water, or find the piñata hanging from the lighting rig.

I will never forget telling a photographer on a job many years ago to move from where he was standing, only to get a very rude retort. I asked him to look down. He was standing with one leg either side of a pyrotechnic that

was about to be ignited and would have cost him his right to Father's Day. That would just not happen anymore. These days we have to ensure a certain clearance, have ample security or staff, fire blankets, extinguishers, and of course fill out a full risk assessment and have all the correct permits well in advance of the event.

None of this is wrong. In fact, I am an ardent supporter of safety on the job. I am however, also reminded by a great comment made by David Grant many years ago in an interview where he stated that despite all the prohibitions and rules we now have to work by, he never likes to say "no". There is always another way to do the job and make it work. I agree whole heartedly. Safety does come first, but there is always another way to "skin the cat".

For me the biggest change we now have is we are forced to actually think about what we are doing. If there is the propensity for danger on a job then look at it, analyse it and mitigate it. It does not mean, don't do it. You can always make it happen. Just do it differently.

As event producers/creators, one of our responsibilities as I see it, is to ensure that the environment we ask our suppliers and guests to work and play in, is safe. They put their trust in us to deliver a product that will not hurt them and it is up to us to make that happen and ensure our suppliers don't cut corners, for whatever reason.

I did an event inside a motor tunnel. I was consumed by the safety aspect and mitigating all risk for my client and suppliers. I had every person on the job submit a full risk assessment, copies of PL, WH&S, workers' comp and signed personal waivers. I had created a mammoth Risk and Safety Assessment document (at least 10 inches thick, surely that was thick enough?) and went to a meeting with their WH&S manager armed and ready to respond! I was confident I had covered every eventuality for an event inside a motor tunnel. He sat me down and smiled at my impressively huge folder. He looked at me and laconically informed me that in the case of an emergency, guests and crew should run for the end of the tunnel (40m away) to a pre-designated spot. "It's a bloody tunnel, so tell 'em to get out!"

That was it. If there is a problem leave the tunnel. Simple, to the point and no drama.

There is no question about it, there must be safety on any job. Losing a life, a part of your body or getting hurt is just not an option, however, fear of this should not paralyse or preclude us from creativity in an industry where we are all about innovation and the promise of doing it differently and "new". **m**