

# PLANNING

# TO

# DANCE

Hosting an electronic dance music festival is all about strategy and execution.

BY JACOB MENOEL



My first electronic dance music experience took place in a small, warehouse space called Club Industry. Located in Deep Ellum in Dallas, the venue was like a miniature version of the raves that would become popular in the mid-1990s.

As my friends and I danced to the thump thump thump of industrial techno, laser lights shot across the room and dry ice belled between our legs. It was our great escape from the daily grind of high school life.

Looking at today's electronic dance music (EDM) festivals, it's easy to see that the only change is one of size. Instead of 100 people dancing in a small room, there are tens of thousands of dancers in a large venue or under an open sky.

The EDM business is worth \$4 billion worldwide. Its highest paid DJs make \$115 million collectively. The festivals draw predominately male crowds, and ticket sales are six times higher than other events such as sporting or performing arts.

In December 2013, the Kay Baily Hutchinson Convention Center Dallas played host to Lights All Night, an EDM festival featuring Deadmau5, Icona Pop, and Major Lazer, among others. The event drew 40,000 guests over the two days.


Planning for the event started in January 2013, and safety and security was one of the first items on the agenda.

"The vetting process begins with an understanding of the event logistics and timeframe," said Al Rojas, assistant director of the convention center. "It is the same for every event. The amount of life safety and security resources will be determined by the event history in the building and other locations. Law enforcement intelligence and event activity portrayed by the media also become factors to consider."





A colorful crowd packs the Tacoma Dome for Life In Color. All Life In Color photos are courtesy of USC Events.



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Rojas said the event staff looks at previous show reports and interviews with venue staff. The 2012 event was held at Dallas Fair Park, and Daniel Huerta and his staff were very helpful in the planning process. They also interviewed the event's promoters to determine estimated attendance, arrival pattern of attendees, and the crowd flow at the event. In addition, meetings with Dallas Police, Dallas Fire & Rescue, and event security were conducted.

"There are basic building elements to consider, such as door coverage for ingress and egress, use of vertical transportation (elevators and escalators), public space, dock access for set-up, and other occurring events," Rojas said.

In fact, the action plan from the 2011 event and the "After Action Reports" from 2011 and 2012, Rojas said, became the foundation for the 2013 plan.

"All parties were at common ground, and the process was one of evaluating previous results and factoring in new logistics and current lessons learned from the event industry," he said.

In 2013, the Tacoma Dome in Washington played host to Life in Color, a single-day EDM event that lasted to the early morning hours. For Kim Bedier, CFE, public assembly facilities director for the City of Tacoma, the planning started as soon as the promoter approached the venue for an event date.

"[It] involves the event promoter and his support team, venue personnel, and local law enforcement and medical personnel," Bedier said.

While some events take longer to plan and organize, some can be pulled together in a matter of months.

"Usually, these kinds of events are planned four months in advance with the organizer," said Gonzalo Escámez, CEO of the Cintermex Convention Center in Monterrey, Mexico. "A week before the event, a crowd management team goes over the details of the event (emergency exits, evacuation procedures, fire hoses, and extinguishers). For this meeting, maintenance, cleaning, parking lot, safety and security, food and beverage, and the commercial area staffs are required to attend, as well as the sound engineer of the event in case he needs to step up for evacuation purposes or to cool down the crowd."

## PLAN IN PLACE

As mentioned earlier, the crowd can swell to tens of thousands, making a safety plan a high priority.

“We work closely with the event promoter(s) to ensure a comprehensive safety plan is provided and formulated in cooperation with venue staff,” Bedier said. “This plan is similar to all events; however, there are additional staffing requirements for medical personnel and for safety personnel to be located on the exterior of the venue, including parking lots. The plan is provided to and reviewed by the local police department.”

Escámez said that at his venue’s events there are two checkpoints for visitors.

“At the first check point, we screen visitors for illegal substances, weapons, and alcoholic beverages,” Escámez said. “We also set up at the entrance a sign that outlines the items that are not permitted inside the hall. The second check point is set up at the entrance of the hall. At this point, visitors are again screened with metal detectors.”

The amount of access points that are set up, Escámez said, will depend on the number of people expected to attend the event.

“This is important, as most people will arrive at the same time or 15 to 20 minutes before the event,” he said. “If a big crowd is expected, enough staff should be available for screening, as people will start getting frustrated trying to get in, especially if the concert is about to start.”

Lines were long at Lights All Night. There were two entry points for general ticket holders, and then guests entered one security room via two different queues. Rojas said that next time for the event a dedicated position, “an expediter,” could be used to communicate the process and manage crowd flow.

“There appeared to be some resentment for having to remove your shoes before entering,” said Danna Kress, a Lights All Night attendee. “They were doing *very* thorough drug checks on people, which honestly, aren’t any different than any other EDM festival. I thought it was fairly efficient.”

At the Cintermex Convention Center, for every 5,000 attendees there are four screening lines set up at the entrance and four set up at the hall entrance.

“At the main entrance of the convention center we have one person on each line,” Escámez said. “Only persons with tickets are allowed to enter the convention center for the concert. In addition, there are eight security officers supervising the attendee inspection and taking care of the attendees that are caught with illegal articles.”


Ah, yes, the subject of illegal items. When the general population images EDM festivals, the thoughts of Bacchanalian bashes come to mind, with a mix of music, drugs, alcohol, and questionable clothing choices adding to a safety nightmare. But that isn’t always necessarily the case.



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“Crowds are usually very happy and mellow, but there is potential for substance abuse,” Bedier said. “Venue staff and medical staff must be aware of signs and symptoms. A proper plan must be in place for dealing with dehydration and other issues.”

Police officers are stationed at the entrance of the Cintermex Convention Center for deterrence purposes.

“We also have police officers in the back (loading dock) in case they need to intervene on an issue,” Escámez said. “All security personnel need to be polite and treat attendees with respect, in order to build that security friendly environment. By doing this, we create the atmosphere of having a safe place for the event, especially when a young audience is involved.”

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

Creating a safe atmosphere where everyone can have fun is the main priority of any venue manager, and for those seeking to host an EDM event there are other considerations.

“Be aware of the culture (including the drug culture) associated with EDM events, and be prepared to deal with any ensuing health consequences,” Bedier said. “Network with other venues who have hosted the same genre/artists, and learn all the best practices that are out there. Be sure to involve local law enforcement early so there are no surprises. Be prepared to participate in providing up-front education for patron safety.”

Venue costs (particularly staffing, security, medical, and law enforcement) will be higher than a typical event, she said, so be up front at contract time.

Escámez said that the biggest challenge is crowd management, especially when dealing with standing audiences and alcohol.

“It is important to make sure the hall is not saturated and to keep a close watch on the movement of the masses while standing, as people in the back tend to push forward, crushing people at the front,” he said. “At our convention center, we have installed CCTV cameras on the halls that are used to monitor crowd behavior and mass movement. The security staff is kept informed through radio communication of attendee behavior, in case they need to intervene.”

For venues, the true telling of success is what guests think. Their beliefs are what makes or breaks any continuing events (even if those beliefs are sometimes uninformed).

“The promoters did an excellent job this year,” Kress said. “It was extremely well organized, orderly, stage design and lighting were top notch, [and I] loved the video projection on the side listing out the set order/times.”

Kress did suggest from an attendee’s point of view some things to consider for next year’s Lights All Night event. Other venue managers may think about these, too, if they’re not already.

“I would love to have set times a little further in advance—they went out just before the event and had the artist names, just not set times,” she said. “I think it’s important to have multiple water stations. People were cued up in the lobby, and they weren’t clearly labeled. Also, vendor selection was limited. I would like to see more local artisans invited. There are a lot of vendors involved in the festival circuit that would love to have the audience. Finally, in this same vein, there needs to be more food options. There was pizza and hot dogs and a bag of chips you could purchase. Because this is the better part of the day, there must be more offerings—more healthful options. Again, something local vendors could provide.”

In the end, Kress loved the event’s vibe and enjoyed the community that the venue helped foster.

“Because it’s over two days, you can tell the first-day event goes are a little stiff,” she said. “It was fun to see those who were there that second day begin to shed themselves, getting out of their comfort zones, dancing a little, and giving themselves to the beat.”

And because of thorough foresight, Lights All Night, Rojas said, “Proved to be everything we expected and planned for.” **FM**

Jason Hensel is senior editor of *Facility Manager*.



Projection mapping transforms the Boombox Stage at Lights All Night at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in Dallas.

Photo: Highland Concerts