
Crowd Management: An Issue of Safety, Security, and Liability

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Facility managers have long recognized their obligation to provide their patrons with safe environments in which to enjoy the entertainment that public assembly facilities provide. But changes in what constitutes socially acceptable behavior and the increasingly litigious nature of our society have increased the importance of effective crowd management strategies. The increased importance of effective crowd management (or, more appropriately, the increased *visibility* of its importance) has resulted in greater scrutiny of facilities and the people who manage them. Professional facility managers, in turn, have taken steps to enhance their understanding of crowd behavior and ways to channel the energy inherent in crowds into enjoyment, as opposed to destruction. If facility managers are to be effective, they must understand the enormous complexities of crowd management and they must communicate effectively with their patrons, their staff, and community officials and agencies. In turn, communities should understand the burden of responsibility placed on the facility manager and should provide the support needed.

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To some, the term “crowd management” conjures images of brawny security staff ejecting people who don’t behave properly. In today’s sophisticated facility management environment, nothing should be further from reality. Crowd management today involves

far more than simply breaking up fights and ejecting unruly patrons from public events. Crowd management starts with facility design and continues through booking policies, ticketing arrangements, alcohol management, local lawmaking and regulation setting, and setting the tone for events. In short, crowd management is an important part of the intricate fabric of facility management. Every element of a public event, from the conception of the facility itself to maintenance before, during, and after the event, is part of crowd management.

The ultimate objective of crowd management is the safety of patrons. A secondary objective is minimizing liability exposure for the facility and the facility’s owner. If the first objective is met, the second is apt to follow.

Facility Design

Let’s start at the beginning. Facility design can contribute significantly to the likelihood of crowd-management problems. For example, a facility designed so as to permit large crowds of patrons to enter in waves is more likely to have problems than a facility that requires patrons to gather some distance away and enter in narrower lines. Retrofitting facilities is certainly possible, and it is done frequently, but the least expensive and most effective approach is to incorporate consideration of crowd management issues into a facility’s design at the outset. Reducing congestion at entry points is an effective way to minimize the likelihood of problems at entry. The involvement, at the design stage, of a seasoned facility manager who has experience in crowd management will go a long way toward effective crowd management once the facility is completed. Not only will patrons’ safety and security be enhanced, but the specter of injury and lawsuits will diminish. This issue is often a balance of functionality

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versus visual appeal. The two need not be mutually exclusive—the architects and planners must listen to the facility manager, and the facility manager must understand the aesthetic concerns of the designers. Working together, a workable, attractive facility will be the outcome.

Booking Policies and Decisions

Booking policies and decisions can have an enormous impact on crowd management. Some facilities are not suited for the type of crowds that certain talent is apt to attract. For example, talent that might attract a very large, young, and spirited crowd may not be suited to a facility with limited seating or one that was designed without attention to alleviating a crush of patrons at entry or exit.

A professional facility manager can ensure that bookings are suited to the facility, thereby minimizing the potential problems that unwise bookings might create. With unusually popular talent, a problem to be avoided is booking too big an event in too small a building. The professional manager can determine whether multiple performances are warranted or whether ticket sales will be limited. Even here, though, the manager may be exposed to potential legal liabilities; the employer must understand such sensitive matters and be willing to stand behind the manager's decision, provided the rationale for making it was sound.

Another issue regarding booking policies is the degree to which a facility's management is involved in selecting events. If booking policy calls for the facility manager to turn over all operational aspects of an event to the promoter or producer, the manager loses the ability to influence good crowd-management practices. To be effective, the manager must have the authority to establish and enforce rules pertaining to events booked in the facility.

Ticketing, Seating, and Admissions

Seating arrangements, ticketing policies, and admissions practices can play a powerful role in managing crowds effectively. Depending on the size and type of crowd expected, decisions can be made to minimize the spontaneous development of crowds at critical points in or near the facility. The professional facility manager will determine whether reserved, general admission, festival, or combination seating is appropriate to the event and whether one type of seating arrangement might create danger. A manager whose hands

are tied in this vital area can only take remedial measures that rarely duplicate the effectiveness of good planning. Managers frequently make contact with colleagues who have recently dealt with a performer or group of performers to learn whether problems arose and, if so, their nature. By consulting professional peers, the manager can be better prepared for problems. In many cases, planning involves ticketing policies and seating and admissions arrangements geared to reducing the likelihood of crowd misbehavior.

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An experienced professional facility manager will use ticket sales information to help determine appropriate crowd-management strategies. For example, the ratio of cash to credit purchases can tell the manager a great deal about the age of ticket purchasers, and the average age of patrons at an event will influence the crowd-management strategies used at the event. If an event is sold out, the manager can restrict admission to the facility and often limit its parking areas to ticketed patrons, thereby reducing the size of crowds and potential for problems.

Crowd management starts long before an event begins—it can be needed the first day tickets go on sale or even as early as the event is announced. If a large number of people is anticipated and if a sellout is likely, managers can avail themselves of tested methods to minimize or eliminate problems in ticket lines.

Alcohol Management

Today, one of the most important issues of crowd management is alcohol. Alcohol is a thorny problem with many questions the facility manager must address:

- Should alcohol be served inside the facility for a particular event?
- Should security include uniformed police (and in what capacity)?
- How should intoxicated patrons be precluded from entering the facility?
- Should intoxicated patrons found inside the facility be ejected or arrested?

The matters of concern regarding alcohol are virtually endless. Facility managers do

not question whether there is a problem with alcohol abuse in connection with public events—there is and always has been. Alcohol problems exist even in facilities in which no alcohol is served.

Facility managers must determine how best to deal with the problem, based on the communities and facilities they manage. Many managers have implemented programs designed to minimize abuse of alcohol at their facilities. Closely connected with these efforts have been programs to reduce pre-event and post-event injuries connected with alcohol misuse. In many jurisdictions, the facility is subject to liability if a patron leaves an event and is injured or killed (or injures or kills someone else) as a result of alcohol abuse. Whether the facility served the alcohol or not is often irrelevant; the fact that the patron was inside the facility and was allowed to leave the premises is often enough for juries to find guilt with the facility. This type of concern—and the attendant liability—makes it doubly important for the facility manager to have an opportunity to contribute to the community's policies involving alcohol abuse and its laws and regulations on dealing with alcohol abuse at public events.

In recognition of the importance of effective alcohol management, the International Association of Auditorium Managers (IAAM), in conjunction with several other organizations, formed the Techniques for Effective Alcohol Management (T.E.A.M.) Coalition. The purpose of the T.E.A.M. Coalition is to identify and establish techniques to enable alcohol servers and others involved with persons consuming alcohol to practice effective alcohol management. IAAM believes effective alcohol management requires joint efforts between facility staff and local lawmakers and law-enforcement agencies. Only by operating under the same assumptions, pursuing the same objectives, and acting jointly toward common goals can alcohol management programs be truly effective.

Tone-Setting and Communications

The tone of an event is influenced by the talent (rock group, football team, or circus, for example), the crowd, the facility's physical layout, and other factors. Among those other factors is the demeanor of the facility's staff. Beginning in the parking lot, continuing into the facility, and back out again after the event, facility staff and security personnel can have a significant influence on crowd behavior. Properly trained and equipped, staff and others associated with an event can convey the message that a certain type of behav-

ior is expected in connection with the event. A key, indeed critical, element in setting the appropriate tone is communication among everyone involved, from the facility manager to parking attendants, ushers, security, catering staff, local law-enforcement agencies, promoters, and producers. If the use of pat-down searches or metal detectors is permitted, patrons are immediately made aware that weapons (or alcohol, in some cases) will not be permitted. (The facility manager may determine that such actions could incite problems rather than reduce them. The manager's judgment should be based on professional experience and available information.) Signs to communicate the restrictions can reinforce staff's activities. A recorded message broadcast at entry points, advising patrons to leave cans, bottles, and other restricted items outside the facility, can help. All of these are efforts to communicate to the crowd what tone is being set.

Communication and tone-setting are important during and after an event, as well. Patrolling security personnel equipped with two-way radios can reduce problems during a performance. (Radios should always be used with ear pieces, so that security bulletins cannot be heard by the crowd.) If an emergency arises during an event, emergency procedures—which should be established in advance and reviewed regularly—should be put into motion. Signs at designated exits should be well-lit. Management should be able to communicate with the crowd verbally through a public-address system that has an emergency power supply.

To prepare for future events, every event should be critiqued and reviewed afterward to identify problems and to determine whether specific activities worked well. Documentation of such review meetings provides the manager and the facility staff with reference for future events.

Communication is at the heart of effective crowd management. Communication at every level, internal to the facility and between facility staff and community agencies, is critical. Good communication requires that crowd management and safety plans be adaptable to the contingencies that arise during events. It also requires cooperation on the part of all personnel involved. If traffic flow into or out of the facility area is of concern, the manager should be able to communicate with people in the community who can adjust the timing of traffic lights or change traffic-flow patterns temporarily by making some streets one-way. If emergencies arise and a show of force from local law enforcement is needed, the manager should be able to communicate with people

who can respond immediately.

Everyone involved with an event, including facility staff or fire-department officials or police, should be made to understand that, for the protection of the public, everyone must work together and communicate with each other. Every agency's concerns should be addressed, but cooperation is key.

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Every public event must be viewed as having the potential for becoming a serious problem, or worse. With that in mind, everyone involved with the event or with community services required of the event must plan ahead, anticipate potential problems and take steps to avoid them, and be ready to respond to contingencies.

Finally, it should be understood that every public event is different, and different techniques for crowd management will be necessary, depending on the event, the community, and the facility. While many of the issues discussed above may be useful in any given circumstance, the facility manager must exercise judgment. In the end, the facility manager must decide what is best and what is appropriate for the situation at hand. **PM**