

Swimming With Sharks and Other Perils of Special Events

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Facility, Program and Transportation Safety

'Tis May, 'tis May, the merry month of May, when thoughts turn to sports competitions, street fairs, music festivals, parades and other special events. It's a wonderful time of year to promote a nonprofit's name, encourage participation of a new crop of volunteers, and perhaps earn some unrestricted funds to support programming. In all this excitement, make certain that you allot enough time — yes, dare we say it — to evaluate the risks, as well as the opportunities, associated with your special events. Remember that a misstep for your nonprofit may damage not only your revenue stream, but also your fine name. You can purchase insurance to finance some aspects of the risk, but damage to your reputation can put you in arrears for years or seal your doors forevermore. So make certain the Maypole is firmly seated in the ground, and the ground is level and minus potholes or exposed roots, before people dance around it.

Risk management isn't about dampening enthusiasm or squelching fun. Appropriate risk management activities should be integrated into daily tasks and mind-sets. This incorporation actually elevates fun and enthusiasm by reducing anxiety that an unknown something will go wrong at the worst possible time.

To pique your interest in increasing safety, here is a synopsis of situations where things didn't go according to plan in otherwise well-managed special events. Although the size of the events and risks may be beyond the scope of many nonprofits, there are lessons to be learned from them. Even the pros can underestimate Mother Nature and Murphy's law.

When It "Rains" on Your Parade

In March of 2002, the Minnesota Supreme Court upheld a ruling requiring the City of Minneapolis to pay no-fault insurance benefits to four of the victims of the Holidazzle parade incident that occurred December 4, 1998. A Minneapolis police van swerved into the crowd of people who were awaiting the arrival of the annual winter event on Nicollet Mall. Two people died and 11 were injured. The insurance payment was previously ruled outside the state-mandated liability limit of \$750,000 per case.

What you might do to make the crowd safer:

- Limit the speed of motorized vehicles in your parade to 10 mph.
- Restrict drivers (including clowns on bicycles or unicycles) from weaving or swerving towards the crowd.
- Forbid throwing of candies, toys, trinkets or other items into the crowd, or *only* permit entrants walking along the curb to hand out such items, to prevent small children from running onto the parade route.
- Require that animals be under control at all times: those riding on floats must be tethered to the float; experienced equestrians must handle horses.
- Bar fireworks, starter pistols and canon; moderate the level of amplified sound effects and music, which can startle animals or drivers.

The wind was knocked out of the debut of The Wild Thing balloon at the 1998 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The character balloon received a 10-foot gash in its side when it was blown into a lamppost along the route. No one was injured — unlike the previous year when high winds blew the Cat in the Hat balloon into a lamppost

with such force it broke off the lamppost's arm, raining debris on the crowd. The most seriously injured was a Manhattan resident, who suffered a skull fracture and was in a coma for nearly a month. She filed a \$395 million lawsuit against the city, Macy's and the lamppost manufacturer. The suit was settled on the eve of jury selection in March 2001. Ironically new requirements enacted following this incident included reducing the size of the balloons, having a meteorologist on hand, and grounding balloons if winds reached 23 mph and gusts hit 34 mph. None of these saved The Wild Thing.

What you might do to make entrants safer:

- Limit the length, height and width of floats to dimensions that accommodate the route's street widths, turns, bridge clearances and overhanging branches.
- Require all decorations be fire retardant.
- Insist that each float carry a fire extinguisher.
- Require that floats carrying people to have secured handrails that riders must grasp at all times, and that no one extend arms or legs beyond the edges of the float.
- Prohibit anyone in the parade from using alcohol or drugs prior or during the event and from smoking anywhere near floats or costumes in the staging area or during the event.
- Require that vehicles be in good mechanical condition.
- Specify there must be two unimpeded, quick exits from the vehicle for the driver.
- Monitor weather conditions and make adjustments as needed.

Races That Ran Wild

Winds also wreaked havoc with the 1999 New York City Marathon, run in November, but that was the least of the organizer's worries. In July of that year, nine wheelchair athletes filed a lawsuit in federal court, charging the New York City Road Runners Club with "bigotry and elitism which caused humiliation and harm" to wheelchair racers. They claimed the organizer's conduct violated the Americans with Disabilities Act and New York's Human Rights Law among others. Right after the suit was filed, the racers won a court injunction against interference on the course. Thus the November 1999 NYC Marathon was the first in 10 years where wheelchair racers weren't stopped along the course, forced to run an alternate route or delayed so lead foot racers could cross the finish line first. In early 2000, the suit was settled out of court resulting in two large changes: 1) in 2000, wheelchair winners received trophies and were included in the official ceremonies, and 2) in 2001, the Marathon began awarding prize money to the top wheelchair finishers.

What you might do to level the playing field:

- Find out what laws pertain to your event and make certain that you follow the laws' intent.
- Verify that there is handicapped parking and how close it is to the event entrance.
- Make certain the terrain between parking space and entrance is accessible: smooth pavement, ramps or elevators.
- Require handicapped-accessible bathroom facilities.
- Set up registration tables at a height convenient for those seated or standing.

This year runners down under will be rerouted for their safety. The Huntley (Australia) Half-Marathon organizer has changed the race route so it no longer crosses State Highway One at the stoplight in Waikatao town as it has for the past eight years. The route won't use the two pedestrian bridges as an alternate either. The Waikato District Council is afraid the bridges used to cross the highway and the river wouldn't hold up under the weight of 1,800 or so runners pounding across them.

What you might do to make the marathon route safer:

- Work with a local runners club to map out the best route for your competition.
- Publicize the route well in advance and publish/post a map of the route with start and end times on the day before the race.
- Enlist the help of local law enforcement to block streets intersecting with the route and to direct traffic elsewhere and clear the route of all parked vehicles the night before the event.
- Assign a lead vehicle to proceed the front runners by and eighth of a mile and a "sweep" vehicle to trail the last runners by the same distance.

On Australia's Gold Coast, a pack of 50 sharks disrupted 7,500 surf lifesavers competing in the 2002 national

titles. Officials pulled competitors from waist-deep water, while dispatching boats and helicopters to assess the risk and drive the sharks away. Sharks are lured to shallower, warmer water to feed on schools of baitfish. Hundreds of sharks (aggressive tiger and hammerheads among them), some over 13 feet long, were involved in a feeding frenzy elsewhere along the tropical coast. As a result, one competitor took to practicing in his home pool. Another said sharks had been known to take a chomp out of a surfboard. There have been other shark warnings at past events and the procedure is always the same, said a referee — “We clear the water until the threat is gone.” The sharks delayed the second day of the event by one hour. The championships feature running, swimming, surfboard and surfboat races.

A fund-raising race in the United States was held in floodwaters. “We’re going the extra mile to find the cure!” was the rallying cry for five teams of determined paddlers who competed in the Great Mississippi River Race for Rett Syndrome in May of 2001. And they did breaking several world records. The world’s longest canoe and kayak marathon race — 2,348 miles nonstop from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico — coincided with some foul weather, flooding and unusually high river-water flow rates. In order to proceed against these high risks, organizers negotiated special permission from the U.S. Coast Guard to travel on closed sections of the flooded river, and from the U.S. Corps of Engineers to navigate spillways of several locks and dams to ensure safe passage for the racers. The oldest racer, 78, and his teammate won. But the race wasn’t without mishaps. The second-place winners had a literal run-in with a sheriff’s boat that collided with them in a restricted stretch of water. One team’s kayak overturned and disappeared over a dam. The team swam 75 yards to shore, shopped at Toys R Us for a replacement kayak and continued the race. The two other teams had to pull out of the race for medical reasons. You’ll find the safety program for this event race at www.dreamkeeper.org/safety.htm. Part One focuses on “team preparedness and communication” and Part Two focuses on a communication plan in light of an emergency, and a Plan B.

What you might do to improve safety in a high-risk event.

- Decide whether or not the event is worth the risks.
- Prepare for how you will respond should the risks materialize and whom you can call on for help.
- Develop a set of criteria for when to postpone or cancel the event.
- Provide onsite medical care, as well as procedures for transporting people to offsite care.
- Require appropriate personal protective equipment be worn and competitors to train for a specified length of time or to a specified level for the event.

Amusement Park Thrills That Spilled

Rougher rides and baby-boomers that just can’t give up the thrill of a good carnival or roller-coast ride contributed to emergency room statistics in 1998. The [U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission](#) reported that 9,200 people were treated for injuries linked to carnival rides and theme-park attractions, a 24 percent increase since 1994. The jump “represents motion-related injuries from bad bruises to sprained muscles and herniated disks,” according to *The Wall Street Journal*. Signs giving height, weight or medical (heart, back, neck malady) warnings aren’t doing the trick. People just don’t think the message applies to them and then blame the ride and the park for the motion-related injuries from speed, height and/or directional changes. There have been lawsuits — the one against Walt Disney Co. for Disneyland’s Indiana Jones ride was settled in 2001. There have been deaths — four in 1999.

What you might do to make events at amusement parks safer:

- Make parental permission slips clear; have them signed, dated and returned prior to the trip; and retain them appropriately.
- Train adult chaperones to watch the children and not chat with each other.
- Instruct chaperones to read and abide by warning-sign restrictions for their charges (height, weight and medical problems), and find age- and size- appropriate attractions for each child.
- Orient chaperones to the location of the park’s first aid station and who to contact at the nonprofit in an emergency.

Nonprofits that rent carnival attractions, such as moonwalks, carousels, Ferris wheels and roller coasters that are trucked from city to city, should be aware that they tend to be smaller and less powerful than theme park rides. However, carnival rides caused approximately 22 percent of those ER visits tracked by the CPSC in 1998.

What you might do to make rented carnival attractions safer:

- Make certain that the company is reputable and has adequate insurance coverage.
- Check as many references as possible and insist on proof of coverage.
- Discuss the adequacy of the coverage with your insurance professional.
- Never assume that your own policies will protect your organization in the event a lawsuit is filed.
- Make certain your activities, including a carnival or fair, is fully disclosed to your insurers.
- Make certain a first-aid tent is centrally located and equipped with basic supplies and trained personnel.
- Require that emergency plans be posted along with the phone number and directions to the nearest ER.

A Street Fair That Fell Victim to Its Own Success

Following the August 2000 Notting Hill Carnival in London, England, where two men were “brutally murdered,” the mayor convened a nine-member Carnival Review Group. Its task was to study the way Europe’s largest cultural festival and the problems that its popularity and success have brought, and determine its future. The CRG met with the Notting Hill Carnival Trust and the Metropolitan Police Authority to address:

- the cultural aims of the carnival;
- its economic and social benefits to London;
- location and organizational needs;
- stewarding, safety and security;
- staffing, financial and resource needs;
- management and political structure; and
- the role of the local authorities and other funding partners.

The review group solicited opinions from organizations and individuals affected by the carnival via questionnaire, and invited those directly involved in the cultural, safety and other organizational aspects of the carnival to a series of meetings.

Then the CRG invited the general public to send their views via e-mail about:

- public safety and crowd density;
- carnival location and procession/route;
- travel to and from the carnival;
- police presence;
- carnival content;
- provision of facilities; and
- communication and signage.

The interim report concluded: “What began as a spontaneous celebration [40 years ago] has grown into Europe’s largest street festival, yet the infrastructure and resources available to the organizers have remained at a level associated with a local rather than an international event. Our chief concern is that the carnival must be a safe and enjoyable occasion for participants, visitors and residents alike, young and old.”

Key recommendations for the 2001 event were:

- Ask current carnival funders to provide more detailed risk analysis and joint planning resources.
- Have the Metropolitan Police Service and the Notting Hill Carnival Trust develop a jointly agreed upon community safety plan to allow police to focus on crime detection and prevention rather than crowd management.
- Allocate a police officer to each band or float to help ease congestion on the route and assist the floats in completing the route on time.
- Keep Notting Hill, the historical home of the carnival, at the heart of the procession, but immediately introduce a non-circular route, potentially ending in an open space, to help ease crowd dispersal away from residential areas.
- Reduce the number of large commercial vehicles to increase safety. Firmly establish the family nature of the carnival, particularly on Children’s Day (Sunday), with a reduction in the number of sound systems and commercial floats, making the procession more manageable for the young participants and visitors. Reducing the scale of Sunday’s event would free up resources for Carnival Monday.

The 2001 carnival was attended by 800,000 people according to the police, fewer than the 2 million that usually participate in the two-day event. More than 12,000 people performed on the floats. Due in part to the changes

made following the 2000 event (Fewer main stages focused the music among smaller venues and the parade itself.), there were only 101 arrests (129 in 2000) and 166 incidents of crime (249 in 2000). Even so, there were claims that many of the 600 stewards who help the police maintain control weren't trained and didn't receive proper background checks. The cost of the increased police presence was \$5,781,160 or \$578,116 per detainee that a deputy assistant commissioner said he refuses to pay in 2002. The 2002 carnival will take place August Bank Holiday weekend (Aug. 26-27). Organizers are still mulling over a revised parade route and placing some of the larger sound stages in other parts of the city to make the event safer and less costly.

What you might do to evaluate and improve the safety of your special event:

- Solicit impressions of what worked and suggestions for improvement from all viewpoints: organizers, funders, participants, volunteers, vendors, community-at-large and media.
- Ask for input on signs, communications, activities, games, sound, food, crowd control, parking, location, transportation and accessibility.
- Elicit professional analysis from the fire department, the police department, the EMTs, your insurance professional, risk managers in similar size nonprofits, and the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.
- Assign people to work in subcommittees to draft proposed improvements.
- Agree on a final plan for the coming year's event.

Keeping the Sharks Away

As Scottish poet Robert Burns so glibly put it, "best laid plans o' mice an' men gang aft agley." But just because plans can go awry, doesn't mean you shouldn't make them. Purchasing insurance is one way of transferring some financial aspects of risk to another organization in exchange for a fixed premium. However, insurance isn't a substitute for an overall commitment to managing risk. Risk management activities and programs in a nonprofit focus principally on preventing harm to the persons served by the organization as well as protecting the organization's other assets and reputation. For nonprofits it's always preferable to avoid accidents and missteps altogether because when things go wrong in a nonprofit, the organization may not be able to survive the resulting turmoil. The echoes of an incident may damage the organization's reputation beyond repair.

*To find out more about managing special event risks in a nonprofit organization, refer to your copy of *Managing Special Event Risks: 10 Steps to Safety-2nd Edition* [here](#).*