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Live, Onstage: The Power of Live Entertainment at Special Events

Jul 1, 2010 12:00 PM, By Natasha Garber

Nothing connects a corporate message to attendees — and attendees to one another — like good, new-fashioned, live entertainment.

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A bartender from Acroback flips for guests. Photo courtesy Acroback Productions.

The more we're able to connect to other people virtually, the more we're virtually starving for personal connection. At least that's what the most dynamic live-performance acts are betting on in today's technology-saturated business environment. As they scale the heights, swing from the rafters and stalk the stage, they're not just entertaining guests — they're allowing guests, as one entertainer puts it, to "rediscover their humanity."

BODY WORK

It has been more than 25 years since Guy Laliberté first formed Cirque du Soleil from a band of colorful street performers in Quebec and, it seems,

almost as long since cirque-style shows started showing up at events. Why do cirque acts stay strong? Maybe it's because no other type of entertainment is at once so physically primal and so perfectly adaptable to corporate messaging. Oh — and let's not forget the awesome costumes.

Founded in 1997 by veteran aerialist Marie-Josée Levesque, Montreal's Cirque Fantastic Concept still relies on the durable appeal of circus spectacle to give event guests an escape from daily stress to "enjoy something real, honest and powerful — together physically in one place, beyond their computer screens," as Levesque puts it. She adds, "Corporate groups can easily hire a circus performance to deliver a specific message. For example, a hand-to-hand act can represent the strength, endurance and flexibility of a company. Technical aspects, costumes, decorations, music — all of these and more can be made to reflect the mood of an event's themes."

Michael Manzenet of Los Angeles-based cirque company Wonderworld Entertainment says that in an event market where every vendor must justify its price, "The value of cirque entertainment is the 'wow' factor" — its ability to capture and hold attendees' attention. His troupe's formidable talents — many members hail from Cirque du Soleil productions including *Mystere*, *O* and *Ka* — are particularly well-suited to distraction-packed environments such as trade shows, where aerialists performing on logo-imprinted lengths of chiffon and acrobats handling delicate or technologically complex new products are highly effective at drawing in show-goers. "If your booth has quality [performers] showcasing your products, it's going to get noticed," Manzenet states. "Crowds will come and expand your customer base."

For internal corporate events, particularly incentive and sales programs, cirque performances — which showcase mere mortals overcoming such huge obstacles as gravity itself — can be "extremely motivating," says Sam Trego of San Diego-based Imagination Entertainment, which stages both public and private-event cirque and Broadway-style productions. He points out that pacing and location of entertainment — whether the client selects Imagination's popular *Viaggio* by Il Circo extravaganza or a slightly less death-defying musical theater production — is key. "Placing the right entertainment in the right place in the event will always lead to a desired response," he notes. "I will always remember what a rather well-known insurance meeting planner told me about our shows: 'Sam, your shows are the golf of our program.' I said, 'Golf?' She said, 'Absolutely. Your show productions create a feeling level in my audience that is conducive to good business. You have no idea how much money we make because of the good feeling you create in the ballroom with your shows.'"

WITHOUT WORDS

While many cirque acts are incorporating emcees and custom scripts into their event productions — Wonderworld shows, for instance, include a "ringmaster" character who mixes corporate messaging into his patter — some event entertainment companies are leaving out language entirely. And that's a good thing for events with diverse attendees.

When members of Las Vegas-based Blue Man Group take the stage at a corporate event, they carry with them the cachet of international acclaim thanks to their wildly popular world tours and TV appearances. But Gina Payton, director of sales, says Blue Man Group's corporate entertainment division goes beyond that. After "exploring themes of community, collaboration and creativity" through the group's performance, which often involves performers working together to overcome a physical or mechanical challenge, "corporate groups leave our theaters feeling connected and energized by their shared Blue Man experience." She notes that the sense of community is particularly valuable for groups that "seek to unite, motivate and inspire their attendees" — beyond the barriers of language, competing interests and cultural differences — "which can ultimately result in more productive face-to-face interactions, and sharing of creative ideas throughout the conference and beyond."

New York-based Acrobatic Productions, meanwhile, designs aerial and ground-based "performance installations" that can be placed almost anywhere in the event environment, giving guests a chance to fully interact with both the performers and the brand messages they communicate. The company's Human Mobile, for instance, requires only simple rigging, notes company partner Jonathan Nosan yet "brings a Calder-like sculpture to life, and also allows for client branding on apparatus and truss pieces." Got an event with an eco theme? Stilt-walking Grass Hoppers from Acrobatic's Go Green collection "wear couture suits made entirely of faux grass — super stylishly green," Nosan says. Also from the Go Green group are massive 12-by-12-foot illuminated LED butterflies, which can soar up to 11 feet high on stilts. If it's a reflection of corporate philosophy a client seeks — or a riveting way to showcase a product — few interactive performers shine more brightly than Acrobatic's contortionist Mirror Men, whose mirror-covered, full-body costumes "create a sea of luminescence as 5,000 beams of light radiate from their bodies" every time they move, Nosan notes.

ONE-MAN (OR WOMAN) SHOW

Of course, no act travels lighter than a solo performer. And, A-list headliners aside, no live entertainment is a more affordable option.

Event attendees may never have heard of Vancouver, British Columbia-based Tracey Bell, but they're well acquainted with the headliners she impersonates in her "8 Divas in 44 Minutes" production. Cher, Celine Dion, Tina Turner — Bell transforms herself into these singers and more, even current pop superstar Lady Gaga. "I often host Academy Award-style events where I perform short, high-energy routines between presentations," Bell notes. "I'm Celine Dion announcing awards, then I become Cher in six seconds while performing a three-minute song." She has a talent for every task: "Julie Andrews' 'Maria' is good at housekeeping remarks," Bell says, [while] "Marilyn Monroe is especially funny with a shy male co-host."

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