

Industry Insider: Bill Powell



Title: Vice President of Event Marketing and Sales/Team Leader of Amsoil Arenacross, Feld Entertainment and Motorsports

Education: BA, University of South Florida

Prior Positions: VP of Feld Direct, Feld Entertainment and Motorsports
VP of Event Marketing and Sales, Southern Region/Mexico, Feld Entertainment and Motorsports
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This interview was conducted by Mark Nagel, professor in the Department of Sport and Entertainment Management at the University of South Carolina. Interview edited by Alan Morse, associate professor at the University of Northern Colorado and the Vice President of Industry Affairs of the Sport Marketing Association.

SMQ: Can you describe your career path and your current responsibilities at Feld Entertainment?

Powell: I came into the event business from the artist performing side as my parents and grandparents were circus and vaudevillian performers. They were well known and quite popular in the circuits of sports and recreation shows, Christmas shows, circuses, fairs and exhibitions, and specialty performances. My mother, Gee Gee Engesser, was inducted into the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art as a Circus Celebrity of 2007 and was a 2008 Sarasota Circus Ring of Fame inductee. It was in this world that I grew up, lived, and worked for the first two decades of my life.

I chose to not follow the performing artist path and instead attended the University of South Florida, where I studied business and mass communications. After a series of introductory jobs in Tampa ranging from journalist and working in data services at the phone company, I applied for a marketing position at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The company consisted of two traveling circus units and a small corporate office in Washington DC.

Over the next few decades the company developed Disney On Ice, produced music festivals, a traveling space shuttle exhibit, Broadway shows, children's theatrical shows, and started an aggressive push towards international expansion. I was fortunate to be on the leading edge of the international expansion team focusing on Latin America and Spain. Over the span of 15 years this team established a working model to bring our productions to over 70 countries and approximately three billion new customers.

The company reorganized as Feld Entertainment in 1997. In 2008, the company acquired a motorsports division consisting of Monster Jam, Monster Energy Supercross, Amsoil Arenacross, Nuclear Cowboyz

Freestyle Motocross, and various other motorsports-related properties and supporting divisions. In 2013, the company moved its corporate headquarters to the Tampa Bay region of Florida and built a 700,000 square foot campus integrating all elements of the organization under one roof. In 2014, the company, housed in the newly minted Feld Studios campus, produced Marvel Universe Live, bringing the Marvel Comics characters into a live arena spectacular setting. Feld Entertainment is currently the most robust and vertically integrated organization of its kind in live entertainment.

My current areas of focus within Feld Entertainment are event marketing and sales, stewardship of the Amsoil Arenacross racing series, industry trade relations, and new business development. Over the years I have also served as brand manager for Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus in the United States and Mexico. In 2013, I assisted with the focus towards sport business analytics and recruitment of departmental leaders in this vital new area of our business.

SMQ: Given your varied experiences and responsibilities, is there anything in common with all that you do?

Powell: Ultimately, we are in the business of acquiring customers. Even though we have a variety of events and productions, everything we do revolves around getting customers to pay to attend an event and then selling them ancillary products such as food and merchandise. We want our customers to leave our events feeling that they had a wonderful overall experience, which will increase their likelihood of returning for a future event. Even though I have worked for Feld for many years, the core of what we do, and really what any sport or entertainment entity does, is to attract paying customers.

SMQ: Feld Entertainment obviously offers a variety of different types of events. Are there significant differences among the events in the customer base and how you market?

Powell: Obviously, there are differences between the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Disney On Ice, and motor sports, so it is important to understand the target markets that comprise each event's customer base. One thing to also consider is that motor sports is not uniform and there can be differences within that category. For example, four-wheeled vehicles may attract a slightly different customer base than two-wheel vehicles. Within the two-wheel space, there can also be considerable differences between motocross racing, Moto Grand Prix, and other motorcycle events. We have to understand the demographics and psychographics of our customer base before we can utilize various marketing tools to reach them.

SMQ: When you are planning a show in a local market, how do you first evaluate your target market(s) and how you will "find" those customers?

Powell: At the core of everything Feld does to present a live event in a local market is a defined business planning process. The key human elements of this process are a combination of corporate team associates interfacing with local market experts. I often describe this as a blend of top-down expertise combined with local understanding, expertise, and application. At the center of all decisions is the local event marketing manager, who is responsible for bottom-line profit and loss for business in the market. The marketing managers are empowered to make strategic and tactical decisions with regards to allocation of local resources. We hold them responsible and accountable for the business results. This is done with a moderate amount of oversight from the corporate and regional offices to ensure brand and financial guidelines.

Our business planning process takes into consideration a combination of factors and the presentation of a single market might take two days and several hundred power point slides. During this process we look at historical financial data, market conditions, scheduling, competitive factors, past media delivery, audience analytics, and numerous other elements that "paint a picture" of business conditions we should consider for future engagements. We spend a considerable amount of time analyzing past sales patterns to determine future price structure. We employ variable as well as dynamic ticket pricing strategies. We continually seek to connect the dots and focus on cause and effect patterns in all elements of the campaign.

Once a path is determined that fits the needs of individual and collective properties, we move to the executional phase of implementing the various elements

incorporated into the plan. Later in the process, after the key elements are in place, we move to the operational phase while responding to any changing market conditions. This basic process is repeated for every market and event engagement. The business planning process begins in May through July for the analysis and planning phase. August through mid-December is the execution phase and January through April is operational. The cycle repeats with a fair amount of predictability.

SMQ: Do you find significant differences in the various markets a touring event may play?

Powell: There are certainly differences in each market. Perhaps the biggest difference is the cost issues associated with traditional media buys in the larger markets. The largest cities will have considerable costs for various advertising options. In our case, we typically are only advertising for one event or a week of events, but a company like McDonald's may have dozens of restaurants in a metropolitan market. Often, they can better absorb or spread the costs of expensive media buys in a manner that we cannot. We rely on our local representatives to make those decisions regarding media buys, but understand that local costs can have some impact on decisions.

One thing that is important to understand is that each market is different, even if they have similar basic demographics. Often, the government classification system for a market may not tell the entire story. For example, the Los Angeles and Miami markets have a significant Hispanic population. However, in Los Angeles, the vast majority of Hispanics are of Mexican descent, so many of their experiences are similar. In Miami, there are significant numbers of Hispanics from dozens of different countries throughout Central and South America. The Miami media landscape has media that cater not just to Hispanics, but to specific subgroups of Hispanics, such as those from Argentina, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and other countries. So, if we want to reach the Hispanic marketplace in Miami, it is potentially more challenging given the fragmented media landscape.

SMQ: How important are traditional media buys for your various events?

Powell: It used to be that our most important marketing outlet was newspaper. Every live event had to run ads to sell the show and provide time and date information. Online search engines have replaced the need for print. Even though newspapers began to lose much of their appeal more than 10 years ago, a trend since 2010 has been the growing importance and use of digital marketing rather than traditional advertising buys. Digital marketing activities provide better access to customers and there is a built-in feedback loop that

digital creates. We can gather information in real time when people are engaged with our digital outreach. This helps us learn about our customers and what messages are most effective.

SMQ: How do you utilize the data that you gather?

Powell: Even though it was not necessarily called “analytics” 20 years ago, we have constantly taken a data-driven approach to our marketing activities. As an example, we have always looked at purchase patterns for various shows. Many of our pricing decisions were made after looking at the data points we had accumulated over the years. When we have done a show in a market for many years, we can see what works and what doesn’t. We just had to be willing to take the time to look with a systematic approach. Though what we did then does not match what is done now with more powerful big-data-based analytical tools, the principles of analytics have always been at the core of our marketing decisions.

Certainly, having more data available can make decisions more effective, but it is somewhat ironic to think that in some cases we might collect too much data. We have had to hire people to analyze the data we gather through our various digital activities. Having too much information is a good problem to have. We collect data about the effectiveness of marketing messages, the purchase patterns of customers, the impact of pricing decisions, and many other areas that help our business units succeed. What we try to do with our data analytics is make sure that we can activate and measure the impact of our decisions.

SMQ: With Feld Entertainment operating and promoting events around the world, what are some of the marketing challenges?

Powell: In the mid-1980s the question was if we should take our shows to international markets what countries would offer the most successful opportunities? In many cases, we were entering markets where live events, particularly of the scale of our circus and ice shows, were not common and posed significant logistical and business challenges. Today, having successfully promoted and executed shows over the

course of 30 years, our ability to make decisions based on historical information has improved.

Probably the most difficult challenge in the 1980s and 1990s was understanding the various media environments in foreign countries. In many ways, the media landscape in Latin America was similar to that in the United States in the 1950s. In many countries there were only 3-4 television stations. What was different in some countries was that the limited number of television stations were often owned by one company, so the entire television marketplace was a monopoly. In Brazil, there was the Globo monopoly; in Venezuela, the Venevision; in Mexico, the Televisa. It was not until recently that Azteca entered the Mexican marketplace and there is more competition. In addition to dealing with monopolies, there were often difficulties in purchasing advertising efficiently since some media might have one signal for the entire country. We might promote an event in one city, but due to the media structure, would have to buy advertising for the entire country. While we were exposing our brand to millions, it was not efficient convincing people to buy tickets when they lived hundreds of miles away from the venue. The infrastructure of many countries is now much better, which enables us to promote shows more effectively, but it also means there can be greater competition.

SMQ: What do you see as the biggest challenges for Feld Entertainment in the near future?

Powell: There will always be challenges and opportunities. Parents trying to strike a work life balance, alternatives to family time, and competition along with spendable income for experiential events such as other shows. There will always be reasons to not attend a live event. But, attending an event offers something that cannot be replicated on the largest TV and that is the communal experience of being in the moment and sharing the excitement live and in person. This is what our organization strives to do every day: to create indelible memories and experiences that last a lifetime. As long as we keep our focus on that we will be successful.