

# The Yellow Brick Road to Successful Feature Entertainment..

This year, millions of Events will be staged world-wide, all striving to impress. But hiring entertainment for impact and individuality can be a minefield filled with uncertainty and often, disappointment.

I'd like to help you get the most from your entertainment budget, especially focussing on the use, misuse and abuse of Feature Entertainers.

## Defining our terms:

Entertainment Products can be roughly grouped into 5 categories:

1. Background music – Adds ambience, but can easily be talked over
2. Dance Band (or Dance Duo/Trio etc.) – Gets people up dancing
3. DJ – provides pre-recorded Background and/or Dance music
4. Feature Entertainer (FE) – (including comedians, magicians etc.) ***demand the focussed attention of all guests.*** FEs amaze, amuse, inspire or otherwise entertain with a short, intense presentation. Their value is measured not by the minutes they spend on stage, but by the months your guests are still raving.
5. MC/Compere – hosts the Event and links its elements smoothly

## Tools of trade:

If you've booked entertainment before, you'll remember being bombarded by production requirements, tech specs, or other similarly foreign documents. Showbiz is magic. But just like magic – its not really magic. Entertainers require specific tools of trade just like you need a phone and a computer to run a modern office.

The following are typical requirements for the 5 Entertainment Products:

1. Background Music
  - \* little or no amplification required (the act will often bring their own)
  - \* Enough space for the musicians to perform in
  - \* Chair/s
2. Dance Band
  - \*A dance floor
  - \* Pumping loud-speakers aimed at the dance floor
  - \*Physical space for the band (ie. stage or similar)
  - \*Dance type lighting
3. DJ – similar to Dance Band (DJs usually provide their own production)

#### 4. Feature Entertainer

- \*A stage that is highly visible to all guests
- \*Sound amplification providing clear, solid sound throughout the venue
- \*Bright lights aimed at the stage with the remainder of the room as dark as possible (may vary)
- \*No dance floor between the stage and the audience

#### 5. MC/Compere – as for Feature Entertainer

### **Feature Entertainers are fish out of water**

As you may have guessed, Feature Entertainment is my area of special interest and expertise. To make Feature Entertainment work, you must see it for what it is – a Theatre show out of its natural habitat! While it's difficult for Events to recreate the Theatre experience, the results can be spectacular.

I'd like to run through an imaginary *Night at the Theatre* step by step and explain how to translate this to your event:

*1. Imagine you're at the Comedy Theatre to see a performance by comedian Rave McFanus. You're in the foyer chatting and drinking. Some soft music is playing in the background*

There's no loud band or juggler performing in the time and space prior to the show (although background music is great). The same should apply at your Event. You can't effectively have more than one FE at an event. This includes having any musicians playing on the stage on which the FE is to perform (prior to their act).

*2. A sign reads "No Food in the Theatre"*

Never schedule a performance during a meal. Entertainment and food both cost big bucks – why make them compete?

*3. The bell rings – the show's on soon. You go and take your seat...*

An announcement should be made several minutes before "showtime" asking guests to prepare for the performance. Have your MC or someone known and respected by the attendees make the announcement. If the GM says sit, they'll sit.

*4. From your seat you can easily see the stage without bending or twisting.*

Many Events use round tables so about 30% of the guests have their backs to the stage. Although this is often unavoidable, an effective pre-show announcement will encourage people to turn around.

It's a current fashion to have massive table decorations in the middle of each table, TOTALLY blocking the sightline of up to 60% of the guests. Frankly (with apologies to the suppliers of these items) if you're having feature entertainment, don't have these decorations. They create an impenetrable forest between audience and performer. Your FE dollars will be wasted.

The stage should be raised and positioned in the optimum position for viewing by all guests. You may even consider using video screens so that everyone can see the FE. Also consider that some FEs find it difficult to be effective at a stand-up cocktail functions.

5. *The lights go down .. the crowd hushes ... spotlights hit the stage...*

Every theatre dedicates a large chunk of its space and budget to lighting. Lighting creates the focus required for the magic of showbiz. Most FEs require two basic conditions:

- a) the stage is brightly lit, and
- b) the rest of the room is dark

All other lighting is icing on the cake.

(NB: Some acts prefer the audience to be lit to aid their audience interactivity)

Many upscale function venues have expensive *moving lights (intelligent lights, vari-lites)* which can be used creatively. However, you must plan ahead. The skilled technician required to operate these lights may only be present if alerted to your needs.

6. *... a compere appears, and welcomes the star onstage...*

The FE should be enthusiastically introduced by a professional compere/MC or someone who will attract the respect (or at least the temporary silence) of all guests. Yes, FEs should be able to hold the attention of a crowd, but starting in a room full of talkers is like running a marathon in rubber boots. You may still succeed, but why make it so hard?

Note that some "surprise" FEs, like "The Three Waiters" don't require introduction. Confer with your FE ahead of time.

7. *...you can hear every word without strain*

The Sound Amplification required for a FE is very different to that of the dance band, who need pumping sound over a small dance floor area. FEs require clear, solid sound throughout the whole venue. Discuss all aspects with your Staging supplier and your FE.

8. *The crowd goes wild!*

Effectively presented Feature Entertainment can make your Event unforgettable.

After a great night at the theatre, folks often want to dance. Many Events Planners want to replicate this experience, but here I must warn of the grave dangers of creating the following monster:

**The FE vs Dance Band Brawl !!**

While reading the "Tools of Trade" for the 5 entertainment products, you may have noticed a vast gulf between the production needs of the FE and the Dance Band (DB). In brief:

1. Stage – space is often limited, and must be shared by the FE and the DB. FEs require the stage to be highly visible throughout the venue, DBs just need to be visible from the dance floor.

2. Amplification – the needs of the FE and the DB are totally different
3. Lighting – FEs need to be lit with the rest of the room dark. DBs need the dance floor to be energized by flashing lights.
4. Dance Floor – essential for DBs, detrimental for FEs

Ouch!

Unfortunately many Event Planners address these issues with the “head in the sand” approach which is an excellent stress reliever in the weeks preceding the event but may end in tears. Others confer at length with the DB and ignore the needs of the FE with similar results.

Here’s a few suggestions:

1. Have separate stages for the FE and the dance band
2. Erect a temporary stage on the dance floor for the FE which can be struck down at the end of their performance (some FEs are happy to simply perform standing on the dance floor)
3. Use “Intelligent lights” intelligently
4. Video screens to increase the visibility of the FE
5. Work creatively with your staging company to accommodate both the FE and the DB. (having the DB being in charge of production for the FE is like having the fox in charge of the chicken coop)

Knowledge is power. I hope this information in this article will help you better understand how to use Entertainment to its full potential at your next Event. It’s a win win!

I’m very happy to expand on any of the concepts I’ve touched on in this article. Please contact me direct by email – Brenton Edgecombe; [info@stringfever.com.au](mailto:info@stringfever.com.au)