

Participating at Renaissance Festivals: Seeing the Big Picture

How you can help to make your Renaissance event a success

written by Jeffrey Daymont, 2010

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It takes a lot of talented people to make a Renaissance festival happen. Having a better understanding the Big Picture will help make your event a success.

Everyone who participates in a Renaissance festival, from the CEOs to the privie cleaners, needs to focus on one primary goal: **Give the guests an experience so they want to return again.** That's it.

Without returning customers, no event will stay open for very long. It's up to everyone to provide excellent customer service throughout the day so we can all play again next year.

But there's more to it than just being outstanding at what you do. It's being aware of traffic flow and sharing the patrons with the other participants who create a memorable experience for the guests as well. The guests experience so much in one day: food, entertainment, and crafts as well as parking, standing in lines, and going to the privies.

Here are some guidelines about what you can do to help the guests and to help your fellow participants perform at their best.

Everyone: These are all the people who make the event what it is.

What you can do:

The festival is one big stage. Keep your energy high and stay in character while in view of the public to keep the illusion of being in another time and place.

Go off stage to get out of character, relax, smoke, or talk on your cell phones.

Know the name of your event -are you a Faire or a Festival? Especially if you do more than one!

How you can help the guests:

Make the guests feel welcome and important. Never treat them like outsiders in your world.

Get to know the layout of the festival so you can offer directions to lost guests so they can experience all that the festival has to offer.

Know where the "Lost and Found" is.

Remember that the guests don't know as much about the Renaissance as you do. If the only people laughing at your jokes are in garb then you aren't really entertaining the guests.

Keep your costume looking great and be ready to pose for photos.

Encourage the guests to try new things and play along -many people are not used to interactive entertainment like this.

Keep your prices reasonable and offer a good value -people will think twice about returning if they feel overcharged or that everyone is just out to get their money.

How to help your fellow participants:

Attend morning notes and get familiar with who is in the cast.

Keep non-period and private conversations off stage and away from guests.

Help new participants find back stage areas and where they need to go..

Give change in small bills -these will get passed around as tips that encourage better service from food vendors and entertainers.

Producers and Administration: These are the people who work year round organizing and promoting the event.

How you can help them:

Know and follow the rules -they are there for a reason.

Attend morning notes for any last minute announcements and changes.

Be on time for all scheduled events.

Report any problems or emergency situations.

How they can help the guests:

Provide benches and areas to just sit and relax in the shade.

Try to make the whole site picturesque- it will be the backdrop of many family photos.

Seek the feedback of your patrons- they can tell you if you are succeeding in providing an excellent experience.

Offer a clear map of the site and schedule of the day's events in your program. Also provide signs and clear landmarks to help newcomers navigate. Don't let your guests miss out on fun because they couldn't find it!

Get the most out of your performers by arranging your stages to have seating in the shade and free of distractions. Putting your stages at intersections also make them easier to find.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Arrange morning notes to pass on up to the minute updates and synchronize clocks.

Acknowledge and encourage those who are doing a great job.

Share your goals and visions with your participants -there are a lot of different ideas about what a Renaissance festival "should" be.

Listen to the observations and suggestions of your participants- they can see details that you might have overlooked.

Provide back stage areas away from the guests. Ideally a clean, shaded space for participants to get out of character, change costumes, talk on cell phones, eat, rest, smoke, and store props. Providing seating, tables, clean drinking water, trash cans and a separate smoking area will really show that you care about your cast.

Create an entertainment schedule that encourages even traffic flow throughout the day and lets all of your entertainers perform at their best.

Try not to move your stage entertainers around too much -Your guests will be able to find them easier and your performers can do bigger shows when they don't have to move their props from stage to stage.

Security: These are the people who protect the entrances to keep out people who don't belong and to deter shoplifting and drunken behavior.

How you can help them:

Follow the rules and report any suspicious activity.

Always have your proper identification ready at check points.

Never try to sneak people in or ask security to bend the rules for you.

How they can help the guests:

Serve and protect.

Act quickly when needed without distracting the guests who are well behaved.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Be friendly and courteous. Enforce the rules without abusing your authority.

Parking crew, Ticket sellers and takers: These are the first people the guests meet as they approach the festival. Will the guests' first impression be friendly faces guiding them to their parking space and welcoming them to the event? Or will they experience stop-and-go traffic long lines, and people who just want their money?

How you can help them:

Park in the appropriate participant parking spaces.

How they can help the guests:

Try to only charge for parking if your lot is so small that you need to encourage carpooling or if you need to discourage people from parking in your lot for other businesses. If you have preferred parking spaces you can charge extra to help cover parking crew expenses. Any money saved on parking will be happily spent inside the gates.

Keep the transaction brief and friendly to keep the lines moving swiftly. Remember to say Please and Thank You.

How they can help their fellow participants: Anything to start the day with a smile or a laugh will help set the guests' mood for the rest of the day.

Vendors: These are the people who create and sell original works you can't just find at the mall. The money they pay to be there helps to promote the festival or to pay entertainers.

How you can help them:

Take the time to get familiar with what is for sale and where to find different booths so you can offer suggestions or give directions when needed.

Don't distract their shoppers- the worst thing you can do is to stop a potential sale by drawing patrons out of a booth.

How they can help the guests:

Build and decorate a booth that is photo-worthy.

Have products they can't find anywhere else.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Offer discounts to participants.

Be prepared to recommend other vendors whose merchandise may complement what you sell.

Food Vendors: These are the people who serve the unique and tasty foods and beverages.

How you can help them:

Share a joke with people waiting in their line.

Try some food and share your enjoyment of it with the guests.

How they can help the guests:

Try not to let your lines get long.

Try to make the ordering, serving, and tipping experience fun but quick.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Give change in singles so tipping fellow participants and vendors is easier.

Royalty, Character Actors and Jousters: These are the people who play the honored guests and featured characters of the festival. Often they create a scenario that plays out throughout the day.

How you can help them:

Learn about the storyline of the day so you can interact with them appropriately.

While onstage, treat them with the respect that their character deserves from your character.

How they can help the guests:

Take the time to meet and greet and pose for pictures. This is the only time children will get to meet a knight, king or queen face to face. Disneyland has Mickey Mouse, Ren Fests have royalty.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Support your fellow cast members. Remember that you are only playing royalty.

Stage Entertainers: These are the people who entertain crowds on stage.

How you can help them:

If you can't stay for the whole show, watch from the back and leave quietly when it's time to go. Tone down parades and processions as you pass a stage show in progress.

Don't heckle the shows- remember that the guests are seeing the show for the first time and your ad-libs are not part of the show. If you want to participate in the show clear it with the performer first.

Don't try to take their audience while they are passing the hat- their show isn't over until the last dollar goes in the hat.

How they can help the guests:

Start your shows on time as it's seen on the schedule.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Don't let your shows run long- other participants rely on the traffic flow after your show ends.

Clear the stage quickly and let the next performance begin. If guests want to talk to you after your show move away from the stage so you don't distract the audience of the next show.

Sell your excess singles to vendors so they can make change easier. Those singles may come back to you in future tips!

Hawkers: These are the people who draw guests into booths and shows with a loud voice.

How you can help them:

Engage them in a little banter about what they're advertising, but be sure to follow up with them back stage -some hawkers prefer to work alone.

How they can help the guests:

Be entertaining and funny with your pitch.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Be careful not to interrupt other performances.

Be prepared to improvise with other street characters.

Street entertainers: These are the people who entertain off stage. While you're in costume and in the street, you are a street entertainer too!

How you can help them:

Get to know your street entertainers off stage and see if they are interested in doing some improv with you if you happen to cross paths.

How they can help the guests:

Enlist the help of other participants for crowd control.

Be prepared to end your routine quickly if the crowd gets too big for safety.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Don't let your audience block pathways or vendors.

Historical Characters and Guilds: Some events have groups who recreate the history of the Renaissance with encampments and educational presentations.

How you can help them:

Learn a bit more about the history that your event is portraying and encourage guests to learn as well.

Their encampment is their stage -stay in character when you talk to them there.

How they can help the guests:

While you are on stage involve the guests in your activities and conversations with your fellow actors -don't ignore your guests with private conversations.

Keep a representative ready to answer questions -don't let the guests walk away wondering what was happening.

When you need to relax and get out of character, go off stage and away from guests.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Encourage all of your guild members to join you at morning notes -this will save you from playing the telephone game and having to repeat the news to them every week.

Offer workshops to share your knowledge with other participants.

Parents: These are the people who bring their children along to participate at the festival.

How you can help them:

Learn which children belong to which parents in case they get separated.

How they can help the guests:

Help your children recognize the difference between "on stage" and "off stage"

Make sure your children have activities to give them something to do during their off stage breaks.

Be sure your children share the festival's children's activities with the guests.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Don't let your children run around without adult supervision.

Show by example how to behave during shows. Don't rely on other entertainers to babysit your children- unattended children take away from the guests experience.

Maintenance Crew and Privie Cleaners: These are the people who keep the site looking clean and beautiful. Unfortunately the only time you notice the work they do is when they stop doing it!

How you can help them:

Treat them with respect- they play an important role in making the guests day pleasant.

Clean up after yourself and use the proper trash bins on and off site.

Don't wait for others to pick up trash around your booth or stage -do your part to keep your space looking great for your audience and customers.

How they can help the guests:

Act quickly and swiftly when the need arises.

How they can help their fellow participants:

Take care not to distract the guests as they watch shows or shop.

Renaissance festivals offer a unique experience for our guests- a full day of entertainment and vendors that many will witness for the first time. It's up to all of us to understand the Big Picture so their next Renaissance festival won't be their last!

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I'd like to hear your comments. Email your feedback to jeffrey@daymont.com.