



COALITION FORGES

The Venue Coalition Helps Smaller Markets Attract Content BY RAY WADDELL

With modern, state-of-the-art arenas and theaters in most all small and midsize touring markets, the need for content has never been greater, nor has been the competition in attracting it.

That's where the Venue Coalition comes in, an industry consortium of arenas and theaters geared toward keeping member buildings on the radar of agents, promoters and other content providers.

Veteran Neil Diamond tour producer Jeff Apregan launched Venue Coalition in 2006 with nine Canadian venues. Today, the roster has grown to 48 (and counting), and covers virtually all of North America.

"We go from Halifax [Nova Scotia] to San Francisco, Florida to Vancouver," says Venue Coalition director of operations Andrew Prince, a former Diamond tour promoter rep. "We're all over the map."

Prince says the Venue Coalition's driving philosophy is its open booking policy. "We're in business with everybody. We welcome all content providers," he says. "We're really a convenient, one-stop booking solution in terms of collecting avails or placing holds or providing market research to promoters and agents, and building creative and protective venue deals for them."

As such, Venue Coalition can't think short term and bring the wrong act to the wrong market at the wrong time. "We're always looking out for the best interests of the artists and the promoters. For example, if we don't believe in a show or feel the day of the week is wrong due to a variety of different parameters, we'll bring it to the attention of the decision-makers," Prince points out.

Information is king in this world, and that's what Venue Coalition seeks to provide agents and promoters. "With one phone call these decision-makers have access to a captive audience of arenas and theaters looking for incremental events year-round," Prince says.

Capacities range from the 23,500-seat Rupp Arena in Lexington, Ky., to the 4,684-seat Crystal Centre in Grand Prairie, Alberta. A key to membership is a willingness to participate.

"We really want someone who is interested in the concept and who will actively participate in our group through sharing information," Prince explains. "When we bring them an opportunity, we need them to address that opportunity on a

timely basis. As long as they're willing and able, then we'll bring them onboard after a good sniff test."

The Venue Coalition communicates through monthly conference calls and, on a case-by-case basis, breakout conference calls for individual tours or events. An advisory board serves to bounce around ideas, and the consortium gathers at such industry functions as International Assn. of Assembly Managers (IAAM), the Concert Industry Consortium, the International Entertainment Buyers Assn. and of course the Billboard Touring Conference in New York (scheduled for Nov. 19-20 this year).

The Venue Coalition is compensated through a "nominal" annual membership fee of less than \$10,000, Prince says. "We have a huge marketing campaign where we advertise in Billboard and other trade directories, and other one-off advertising opportunities on certain tours that we work with. We do have a cookie jar."

Few if any tours would make use of all 48 VC buildings, so the consortium and its members can put together block-booking deals, regional runs or even one or two dates on a tour. "On any given tour, a working act will be driving over our markets one or two times a year," Prince points out. "We can put offers out or talk to promoters about co-promoting with us, putting deals out there to convince them to stop in our markets."

A group of nearly 50 buildings obviously has more clout and leverage than an isolated building in a market off the beaten path. "We have been a member of Venue Coalition for two years and they are a great source for event routing information," says Randy Brown, GM of Allen County War Memorial Coliseum in Fort Wayne, Ind. "I know that through their efforts and encouragement we have been able to obtain concert traffic that we otherwise would not have attracted to our market."

In a nutshell, VC is about "identifying who's working, when, where, how much, who the decision-maker is and what the odds are of them coming to our facilities," Prince says.

The objective is to make things easy for those putting together tours, starting with a routing grid on the Venue Coalition Web

site (venuecoalition.com). "An agent can call us and on one phone call they can have access to avails, they can get historical data, technical data if they need it, a variety of things," Prince says. "We hold all that information here."

One of the best success stories is the Blue Man Group tour in 2007 and 2008 in Western and Eastern Canada. "We've promoted over 20 dates with them, and as [tour producer Paul Emery of Emery Entertainment] would say, we're battling a thousand," Prince says. "Canada was relatively unknown to the promoter and first we were able to educate them on each market, then determine the best time of the year to tour, then ultimately we built the venue deals for them. We actually routed the tour and then we placed the marketing on their behalf."

A similar story applies to the Wiggles. Music and other productions Venue Coalition has tapped into include Carrie Underwood, Taylor Swift, Cirque du Soleil and the Radio City Christmas Spectacular arena tour with Madison Square Garden Entertainment. "We've done multiple AEG Live tours and we do have multiple tours in the pipeline with them," Prince adds.

For artists who tour year in and year out, they'll eventually have to move from the major markets to the secondaries. "If you want to help your act, you have to go to where the fans are," Prince says. "On [the Billboard-moderated] panel [at the IAAM national convention], the agents were talking about playing secondaries on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and that's a great thing. If we can work on building a percentage deal, or a no-guarantee, or a lesser guarantee to play to the fans, then we're doing a service to the artists and everybody involved."

And tour producers are tapping into what VC has to offer. "When searching for that perfect routing date on the Ozzy Osbourne tour last fall, [Venue Coalition] presented a golden opportunity time and time again," AEG Live tour coordinator Doug Clouse says.

Prince says the Venue Coalition has a noncompetitive, even complementary relationship with the ArenaNetwork, a similar, large consortium of buildings comprising arenas and arena theaters in mostly larger markets that greatly pioneered this model. Some arenas are members of both organizations. "We're very friendly with ArenaNetwork," Prince says. "It's a similar concept, but we specialize in small to midsize markets."

"It's all about synergy here, that's really the important thing," Prince says. "We want someone who is forward-thinking, and interested in sharing information. For example, if Hamilton [Ontario] gets a call about Taylor Swift and the promoter says, 'Yeah, we're looking at routing her through secondary markets,' then they'll call us and let us know. When you're in a peer group and people share the same goal—which is to get more successful shows—a lot of good opportunities are going to come from that."



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