

# Disasters waiting to happen

*In the light of recent news, Richard John, Realise's COO reflects on some event mishaps:*

**Unless you've been trapped in a mine, you will have seen the global coverage of the disastrous 'Willy's Chocolate Experience.'**

From the AI-generated (and misspelt) website to the barren warehouse and limited treats ('Come and get your single free jellybean, kids') the car-crash was yet another example of the oft-repeated lesson that events are best delivered by events people.

**Hot on its heels was the Brick Fest Live event at the NEC.**

Pitched as the "world's largest hands-on brick building event" the experience was branded a "complete rip-off" after attendees complained about an empty room with very few models and a bouncy castle. In a statement the organisers said: "We are aware that Brick Fest Live is potentially not delivering for adult level enthusiasts."

Sadly, stories like this aren't unusual. Just before the pandemic a 'Fortnite Live' event in Norwich seemed to me little more than an excuse to con 2,500 visitors out of their money. 'Attractions' included a 'cave experience,' in reality a lorry trailer covered with a tarpaulin. The organisers, 'Exciting Events' went into receivership a few months later.



**Some disasters become household names and the stuff of legends. The 2017 Fyre Festival non-event was the subject of two movies.**

Creator Billy McFarland was buried in lawsuits and jail sentences and yet, in 2023, announced that there would be a new Fyre Festival, and the first tranche of tickets sold out. One might wonder about the stupidity of some people, but it's worth pointing out that two attempts to revive the classic Woodstock event failed miserably. Clearly nostalgia ain't what it used to be.

## **In the face of event failures, there's always the underpinning question of whether it's bad luck, incompetence or straightforward fraud.**

Many readers will remember the 'Expo Guide' scam which keeps rearing its crooked head. In the good old days a reply could be sent in a postage-paid envelope; I took great delight in attaching it to a well-wrapped brick and imagining the bill that would be incurred at the other end in some far-flung location.

In some cases the intentions may have been honourable, albeit misguided; in others various factors – weather, strikes, or illness – can be the issue. And, while there is a successful 'Winter Wonderland' event in Hyde Park that delights visitors, many other attempts have been unmitigated disasters. A 'magical experience' designed by Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen in Birmingham closed after one day due to negative customer feedback, while a Lapland-themed event in the New Forest saw the two owners jailed for fraud. The judge summarised: "You told consumers that it would light up those who most loved Christmas... what you actually provided was an averagely-managed summer car boot sale." Oops.

Not everyone is losing out; some of the 'actors' involved in the 'Willy' experience enjoyed a brief but profitable 15-second social media 'career.' And it's unlikely that any suppliers will be out of pocket because, frankly, it seems no-one supplied anything. But pity the poor visitors – and the staff at the venues who have to bear the brunt of their anger. Those of us with grey hair and long memories will look at a pitch and think 'that'll never fly,' but unwary civilians don't have that experience.

## **So what are the lessons from these disasters?.**

Well, the first is that for any small business getting approached to be involved in this kind of project it's worth spending ten minutes on the comprehensive and free Companies House website. You don't need to be a forensic accountant to see that 'event organiser' Billy Coull, the brains behind the Glasgow disaster is too successful business management what King Herod was to childcare.

And the second is to realise that these disasters are like plane crashes – they make headlines because they are so rare. And attending events is a purchasing decision made by humans who are a fickle bunch and difficult to understand. We should all continue to refine and develop our offering, and communicate the benefits.

## **We are all only one event away from failure.**