

FAIRS & FESTIVALS

WARM WEATHER AT L.A. FAIR NOT ENOUGH FOR COOLING ECONOMY

A vendor offers an ear of corn on the midway of the L.A. County Fair



The L.A. County Fair, Pomona, Calif., is becoming a five-week affair, hoping to draw in Labor Day crowds and boost attendance after a flat year, said V.P. of Sales, Marketing and Creative Programming Dale Coleman.

Sunny skies and virtually no rain brought about 1.3 million people through the turnstiles during the 23-day run from Sept. 5-28 at the Fairplex, a three percent drop from last year, said spokesperson Wendy Talarico. The \$28-million, year-round operation is a non-profit agency and does not report total tickets sold, said Talarico, nor does it release food and beverage figures, although she did comment that overall sales were "pretty much in line with last year." Despite the drop in attendance, corporate sponsorship was up this year, bringing in over

\$3 million in revenue.

"Next year's fair will begin a weekend earlier, running from Sept. 5 to Oct. 4.," said Coleman. "The SoCal market is really weekend-based and with freeways and traffic, it's hard to get people to participate in the fair during the week. It's a time when people are looking for something to do, and we wouldn't be doing it if it weren't a holiday weekend."

Coleman said he's not worried about an overlap with the California State Fair in Sacramento — practically all of his vendors have agreed to participate in the expanded schedule.

The L.A. County Fair doesn't typically choose an overall theme, although it does brand its exhibition halls. This year, the Flower and Garden Pavilion was dubbed "Escape to Hawaii" and staffed with Polynesian dancers, lei-making booths and a volcano that erupted at night. The Millard Sheets Center for the Arts' main exhibit was "Hoofprints" paying tribute to the history of horses from early French cave drawings to a Trojan Horse contest which used scraps from a junk yard.

New at this year's fair was the Bark Park, celebrating the life of man's best

friend with fancy dog houses, aromatherapy and a special pet vendors market. Patrons weren't allowed to bring their dogs to the fair, but were treated to dog performances and puppy adoption events. The fair also hosted "A Pirate's Life" exhibits featuring pirate-themed activities, coinciding with International Talk Like a Pirate Day on Sept. 19.

Ray Cammack Shows hosted this year's midway, expanding its ticketless Fun Pass system to include all midway games — last year's midway featured optional ticketless games. Talarico would not release the midway gross for this year's event. Talarico said food sales were also flat, with new entries including deep fried Pop Tarts by Chicken Charlie; chocolate-covered bacon by Sippers & More and a colossal ice cream cone that held two pints of gelato and could feed an entire family, selling for \$16.

This year's media buying was handled by Milner Butcher Media Group out of Los Angeles. The fairgrounds booked its own concerts in conjunction with Petaluma, Calif.-based Wilson Events for the 8,500-seat grandstand. Sugarland was the only concert to sell out, while groups like Jaguares, Lighthouse and Gavin Rossdale all made strong showings, as did the Doobie Brothers with Grand Funk Railroad.

"We ended up setting an all-time attendance record and box office sales record," Talarico said.

This year's biggest promotion was Wristband Wednesday, where patrons could purchase a ticket to the fair and a wristband for unlimited carnival rides for \$20 using a coupon they could pick up only at McDonalds. The fair also offered discount coupons at local AT&T stores.

The fairground's racetrack netted a \$99.9 million handle, down about \$3 million from last year. — Dave Brooks

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