

# Now Hear This!!!



## Professional Air Show Announcers and Your Air Show

BY MARY J. PORTER

It's always a temptation. A local pilot - a friend of one of your board members - says he'll announce your show for free. Heck, he knows planes. He's seen a few air shows. How hard can it be?

A radio station with which you've just struck a sweet media deal suggests that its DJ be the announcer for your show as part of your agreement with them. He's funny. He's popular. And he's bound to pull folks into your show. Won't he?

A hot shot fighter pilot on your base says he's flown air shows; he knows the drill. He'll announce the open house and you won't have to spend a dime. Sounds like an offer you shouldn't turn down, right?

Tempting as it may be, selecting a charismatic local pilot, a radio personality, or even an experienced military aviator to narrate your show could be setting you and your spectators up for a very rocky ride. Still, some shows see the expense of a paid, professional air show announcer as "non-essential," and typically route those funds to the booking of another performer.

But consider this: is an additional twelve minutes of aerobatics worth compromising the experience of your spectators and the image of your show?

### Hire the Announcer First

Air show legend Wayne Handley has worked with his share of announcers - good and bad - and has some stories to share. At one show, where a local personality was narrating, the time came for a feature act to take to the air, and there was dead silence on the mike. "The guy had gone to get a hot dog." When they finally rounded him up and got him back on the announcer's stand, Handley recalls, the first thing he did

was make a lost child announcement.

Handley has counseled many shows, in private, to look carefully at their budget for performers. "Hire your announcer first, then hire your other performers."

"It's more complex than just picking up a microphone," says Rick Soule of the MCAS Miramar Air Show. "Your announcer sets the tone for the whole show."

Seasoned event organizers across North America agree; the announcer is a critical link between your show and your spectators. The image of your show depends on his or her ability to deliver quality entertainment, fulfill your sponsor commitments, promote your vendors and keep your crowd safe and *engaged* - for up to eight hours, nonstop, two days in a row.

The kiss of death for a show is having an amateur announcer who does a bad job. Veteran announcer Frank Kingston Smith relates a story from an open house years ago in Massachusetts.

"It was mostly an Air Force show then, just military hardware with a lot of gaps in between. The DJ didn't know anything about the aircraft, nothing about the pilots, nothing about the statics on the ground, couldn't generate any enthusiasm. And the local press killed them! It was so bad that they were talking about never doing another air show."

### Communicators First

This is a job for a professional, and one who happens to have a wealth of air show experience, knowledge and expertise. "By quick elimination, the local guy is typically terrible," says producer Chuck Newcomb. "They don't communicate with the audience. When you hire a local personality or volun-

teer, you put them in a compromising position. They don't know everything they need to know to do this job."

"It's worth more than you spend to get a professional announcer," Newcomb adds, "and what you spend isn't that much."

Frank Kingston Smith adds perspective. "DJs aren't used to working in front of real people. They have a shtick that works on the air - and on the air they are the center of attention. At an air show, the planes are the center of attention. But even if you have a DJ who flies, air show flying is a different world. They aren't going to understand aerobatics or what goes on in between."

"We think hiring a professional air show announcer is the only way to go," says Muskegon Air Fair director Terry Greivous, who has worked with announcer Danny Clisham for 19 years. "They know what they're doing with regard to air shows. They're familiar with the planes, the pilots, the procedures with the FAA. They work with air bosses around the country and that level of familiarity makes everything run smoother."

Kim Curry of Springfield Air Rendezvous agrees. "We wouldn't do it any other way." Springfield has a long-standing relationship with announcer Herb Hunter. "We consider the safety of our event first and foremost. Yes, our announcer is there to do sponsor announcements and narrate the acts, but he has to be in tune with the emergency plan, and be ready to execute his part of that plan in the event of an accident or other problem."

### The In-Between Time

The time between acts is a critical point at an air show. And it's a time when profes-

sional announcers earn their keep by keeping your audience interested and by meeting your announcement obligations.

Sponsors are top priority. And whether they've supported your event with dollars or in-kind services, they all want to be recognized. A good announcer will make sure they get plugged in proportion to their level of involvement. He'll make sure your spectators know how much your sponsors' support means to the show and why they should patronize those businesses. He will make your sponsors look good and make your sponsors happy. Typically, happy sponsors are easier to turn into repeat sponsors.

Vendors love it when announcers mention them from the stand because people line up. A seasoned announcer will make sure every food and beverage vendor you have - whether they are a master concession-

aire or the Lion's Club - gets pitched to your spectators. The more hot dogs sold, the better for your vendor and the better for you.

The concessionaires like those plugs too, especially if there's a pause in the action. A professional announcer knows your crowd isn't going to be looking up all day. They need a break from the action and the sun. Suggesting they visit some of the booths and tents can provide welcome relief and, if sales are good, your vendors will be pleased.

Statics? They may be sitting right in front of them, but the typical spectator needs his attention drawn to this important element of your show. Veteran announcers know them all, and if they've had time to visit with the crew, they'll be able to give your audience some insight that might just lead them over to a plane they might not have given a second look to otherwise.

Starting to get the picture? A professional

air show announcer isn't just the guy who tells people what maneuver this or that pilot may be doing during his twelve minutes in the air. He's a whole show experience...and key to the experience of your spectator.

It's no coincidence that veteran event organizers all use professional announcers or that every person who has been involved with the air show business for more than a couple of years has a horror story about an air show that decided NOT to use a professional announcer.

### **Safety Is a Key Issue**

Professional air show announcers have faced just about every real or imagined emergency possible - and they know how to handle them. Not that your show is planning an accident or incident, but it's the unexpected and the unimaginable that a professional air show announcer is prepared

## GIVE A LITTLE - GET A LOT

### **What Your Professional Announcer Needs to do the Job**

*Even among shows that have used a professional announcer for years, there are some that still to overlook a few basic needs. Remember, a professional announcer is stuck to his spot once your show begins. Make sure he has the tools in place to do the job you've hired him to do. Use this reminder list to review your procedures well before show time.*

**Water**○ Your announcer is standing in the hot sun, usually without shelter for four to eight hours. Don't bring him a cup when he asks. Have a multi-gallon tank already stationed by the announcer stand, with plenty of plastic cups and a trash can.

**Food**○ Announcers get hungry, too. And they work hard to push your concessionaires, so others might eat. Make sure you have a volunteer check with your announcer often and bring any food and beverages he or she might need. It's a long day without the luxury of strolling between vendors to decide if they want Polish sausage or funnel cake.

**Pottie**○ Your announcer doesn't have the luxury of frequent breaks. When he does, he shouldn't have to run back through the crowd line to the public porta-pottie and waste valuable time. Remember, your sound guy and air boss are also in close proximity. Make sure you have porta-potties stationed within a few steps and with the door facing away from the crowd. No need to make this an exhibition.

**Emergencies**○ Review emergency plans thoroughly with your announcer. When something happens, this is your voice of authority. If he doesn't know what to tell people or where the emergency vehicles are coming from, your problem could be far more critical than the accident on the field.

**Briefing**○ A professional announcer won't miss your briefing. Make sure he gets any time he needs there to clarify any issues. You don't want him waiting until it's too late to ask questions.

**Performers**○ Shows should provide performer information to the announcer as early as possible. Months in advance is perfectly okay. At the briefing is not. Provide copies of everything the per-

former has provided you (including what may be written on the back of their photos).

**Sponsors**○ Give your announcer every last detail about your sponsors. Separate the big donors from the in-kind services. Don't just hand the announcer a program and expect him to figure it out. Sponsors are looking for their return on investment and part of that is how many times their name is mentioned. Make sure your announcer knows who they are, how important each of them is, and how to properly pronounce their names.

**Announcements**○ Your announcer already has a set repertoire of announcements about not smoking, wearing sunscreen, drinking plenty of water, and don't touch the airplanes. Add to this all the plugs he's going to give your sponsors and vendors. Add that to all the acts he's going to bring to life for your spectators. Don't make unreasonable requests for announcements. No one has yet fit three hours of talk into a two-hour show. Make sure also that your announcer knows who is authorized to give him announcement requests. It can create a sticky situation for your show if the wrong announcement gets made.

**Sound**○ Don't skimp on your sound system. If your spectators can't hear the announcer, especially during an emergency, you've got big problems. Even if there's no crisis, you'll lose spectators in future years because they had no idea what was going on. Your sound guy should be right next to the announcer stand. These two work in tandem.

**Location**○ Look at the position of the announcer's stand from the announcer's point of view. It should be on the flightline as close to show center as possible. There is one guy who needs to see everything. Don't make it difficult for him to do his job. Once you have your announcer positioned, make sure he knows the location of the important stuff: first aid, lost kid collection, autograph tents, water and other important points. Make sure the locations of these can be easily described from the announcer stand.

**Suggestions** - Listen to your announcer's suggestions. They've been to a lot of shows and they've seen a lot of mistakes. Take advantage of the experience they bring to you. I

for. Just talk to a few who have had to announce through some of the industry's major accidents and you'll get a true appreciation for their skill.

"When an accident occurs, the crowd goes to instinct, looking for the problem," says Danny Clisham who was announcing at a Florida show in 1998 when two Red Barons collided in mid-air and fell to the ground in what seemed like slow-motion. Being able to grab the crowd within the first few seconds and keep them from panicking is where a professional announcer can prove his greatest value.

Clisham explains the process. "We have to change gears, change voice, go from excited to calm and keep talking non stop for at least 45 minutes to one hour before you can pull back. You have to get the crowd on your side, reassure them, instruct them, and you have to say it over and over because they won't hear you the first time. Keep them behind the fence and help them

find ways of distracting themselves. Go over every static, the history of the B-17, talk about what food is available, that the concessions people are open. Let them know how long it will be before the flying will resume - typically one and a half hours. Don't stop talking. People will remember the lapses."

Clisham says he always refers to any incident as "a problem" no matter what it is.

Gordon Bowman-Jones, who was announcing during the F-14 Tomcat accident in 2000, says he stops referring to the pilot by name and never talks about a fatality, preferring spectators to get that news from television or newspapers. Both Clisham and Bowman-Jones appeal to families to explain to their children what has happened and to find ways of distracting them so they won't be afraid.

Clisham says he likes to make sure people know that the pilots in the accident were aware of the risks involved in air show

flying, but had a passion for this business that made them do it. He asks parents to reassure their kids that they were doing what they loved when this problem occurred so they shouldn't feel sad about it.

That kind of reassurance is where a professional air show announcer can move your spectators to an entirely different psychological level that can make the difference in how they behave during the extremely sensitive moments immediately following an accident and how they remember the event hours, months and years after the incident.

"How you react post-accident will influence the future of your event," says Bowman-Jones. "There are too many incidents of bad PR causing significant subsequent problems for air shows."

### The Horror Stories

If you're still thinking that your amateur can do the job, just ask an air show veteran to tell you a story or two. Anyone who has

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been involved in the air show business for more than a couple of years has at least one. The mild ones range from Wayne Handley's hot dog story to amateurs announcing one act when another is in the air, to a friend of the board making off-color comments during his narration, to dead silence while something so awesome was happening in the air that it rendered the narrator speechless.

The not-so-mild stories should concern anyone still using or planning to use an amateur announcer. "Imagine the worst thing you could possibly hear," says Danny Clisham. "Screaming, then 'Oh my God!, oh my God!' and screaming and 'Help him! - Oh my God!' into a live PA." That's just what happened at a show where a local personality was announcing during an accident. "The crowd will always remember that."

"What you have to remember," Clisham stresses to remind, "is that the pilots in these accidents are very often our friends. And we still have to maintain our professionalism." Most professional announcers now have a policy for shows who want to use amateurs or pilots who want their own narrator during their act. "We have a pro right beside him at all times who can take the mike if there's a problem."

### The Hired Gun

All of this is not to say that you shouldn't utilize local personalities or performer narrators to add color to your show. A change in voice, in tempo, can be welcomed by your spectators and it does give your professional emcee a rest. But be careful. Make sure your pro is always in the driver's seat, and take advantage of all the talent they bring to your show.

"When a show hires me, they get me lock, stock and barrel," says announcer Rob Reider. "If they want me to emcee something, they've got me. If they want me out early to talk about balloons, I'm there. I'm a hired gun, just like a 'real performer' and I'll do what they need me to do."

Will the guy who's doing it for free have the same level of commitment? Miramar's Rick Soule thinks not. "With a volunteer announcer, it's harder to give directions and expect them to do it. Like any volunteer, you can't abuse them. A good show with a weak announcer can leave a bad taste in the mouth of your audience. It can be counterproductive." Soule stresses that a hired professional announcer is your employee. You tell them what to say and do.



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And that's another area that needs attention. Professional air show announcers spend a *lot* of time preparing to look extemporaneously entertaining for eight hours. If, as an event organizer, you think your job is done once you've hired them, think again.

"You have to spend time with these people," says Springfield's Kim Curry. "I sit down with Herb Hunter for a minimum of four hours to go over everything he needs to know about the acts, about the sponsors. He's intimately familiar with our emergency plan."

Your air boss plays a role here, too. Dirk "Gumbo" Hebert, air boss for the Neptune Festival Air Show at NAS Oceana, has worked for years with Frank Kingston Smith, but has had his share of not-so-professional alternatives.

"I look for a guy who prepares his script

well in advance. Frank comes with his book. He gets my timing sequence. And he demands that we sit down for several hours to go over that so he knows where the breaks are and when he can do his other announcements. Most of the amateurs shoot from the hip."

#### **One of Your Performers**

Okay, hiring a professional announcer is still a budgetary concern and in a struggling economy, it's tempting to think you can get a whole lot more for what you'd spend to get a professional announcer. But Miramar's Rick Soule offers food for thought.

"It's like your marketing department in an economic downturn. A lot of companies will sacrifice their marketing professionals when those are the guys you need most during that downturn. A professional air show announcer brings expertise, experi-

ence, knowledge to your show. If you're putting on a professional show, you hire a professional announcer. It's a requirement, not an option."

"It's about experience," adds Muskegon's Terry Grevious. "You may be able to drive a truck, but would you try to drive Shockwave? Even if you're a pilot, would you fly aerobatics without any training or experience?"

The difference between a professional and an amateur is night and day. Even if your announcer is an experienced pilot, maybe has first hand knowledge of military aircraft, what will be missing is that critical sense of the commercial aspect of your show. And that goes beyond making your sponsors and your vendors happy.

"The military is governed by a solid set of commercial regulations," reminds Gordon Bowman-Jones. "And someone not familiar with these can make huge mistakes. An amateur will say, 'And now, the Blue Angels, sponsored by Swenson's Ice Cream!' You can't do that! This is taxpayer-sponsored act. But this happens all the time and the military has to deal with the backlash from the public."

Bowman-Jones adds an observation that even event organizers have expressed. "The people who run the show are generally so busy that they don't hear what's coming from the announcer's stand. They don't know how their image is being affected." He stresses how important this is with military shows. "An unprofessional job at the mike impacts how your audience feels about their military forces. You lose the biggest PR opportunity you have with your community."

Most announcers, Bowman-Jones points out, cost about the same or less than most performers. Sure, everyone has committed their time to your weekend, and your pilots and ground acts have much more overhead than announcers do. "But they fly for twelve minutes. We're working without a script for four to eight hours."

If budget is a concern, remember, a professional air show announcer is every bit the performer that your aerobatic hot shot or jet truck is. He or she creates and maintains the atmosphere for your event and makes everybody look good. The free offers may seem tempting, but no matter what your announcer cost, it will cost you more in the long run if you don't use a professional. |

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