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## Partners and Admission Fees Come to Rib America Festivals

By: Vernell Hackett

*Kevin Cronin of REO Speedwagon; Dave Lucas, Live-360 CEO, and Frank LoPresti, Festival Partners.*  
(Photo credit: Steve Mitchell)



### **PARTNERS AND ADMISSION FEES COME TO RIB AMERICA FESTIVALS**

More than 300,000 people attended Rib America festivals in St. Louis; Indianapolis, and St. Paul, Minn., this year. Attendance at the St. Louis festival was about the same as last year, Indianapolis was up by 30 percent with 150,000 in attendance, and St. Paul was down about 20 percent.

Dave Lucas, CEO of Live 360, said that his company and Frank LoPresti's Clutch Entertainment are co-producers of the food and entertainment festival. He said the gross for the three festivals was up this year but declined to give specific numbers.

"To date the festivals have been produced by us with no partners," Lucas said. "We are in the middle of negotiating with one or two communities about partnering with us next year. Typically we go into a city and find a venue, park, parking lot, vacant lot — ideally 10 acres plus — and we rent it and then everything else is our responsibility, from booking talent to onsite operations, hiring the rib vendors and other food specialties, drinks, and so forth."

Lucas said it costs "well over several hundred thousand dollars" to produce one event. The expenses to run the event are recouped through sponsorships, getting a small percentage from food vendors and percentages on the beverage concessions, including soft drinks, beer and wine.

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For the first time in the history of the festival, a \$3 cover charge was implemented this year after 4 p.m. Lucas said they chose that time frame because generally the festival is busy from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., then there is a lull until around 4:30 p.m. By 5:30 p.m. things start to pick up again.

"The charge enabled us to move up the quality of entertainment a couple notches," Lucas explained. "We were able to spend a little more money and also bring in more entertainment."

Lucas said the entertainment budget for the three festivals was a little over \$1 million. He said they look at all genres of music but that classic rock seems to be the most popular. The Charlie Daniels Band, Hootie and the Blowfish, REO Speedwagon and Ted Nugent went over very well in Indianapolis, according to Lucas. The other two cities had Cameo, Big Head Todd and Rick Springfield in the entertainment lineup.

In addition to music, there is an area for children, which includes games, rides and other activities. Lucas said the festival truly is one for the family. "I think that when you talk about live entertainment, children's activities, ribs from around the country, specialty food, arts, crafts and other activities — it's a family event. It's almost a perfect mixture for 'why not' [have the event] in any community."

In order to take Ribs America into a new market, Lucas said there are several considerations. "First of all we have to decide whether or not the market will support an event like this. We have to see what other festivals are in the marketplace, see that we have good spacing between the events that are there and the event we propose to bring in.

"We need to see that there is interest for our event and cooperation from the city," Lucas continued. "There are a lot of licenses and permits that one has to get to put on one of these events and we want to make sure the city and private sector will welcome us and can help with that process.

"What it brings to the city is a community-wide event. You will find people of all ages, children in strollers, and people from all walks of life — blue collar, white collar, they are all there."

The Rib America festival in St. Paul – its 15th — had a cook-off, but the other two cities chose not to have one. There were between 10-12 rib cookers booked into each event, plus other vendors selling corn on the cob, ice cream and pizza.

"Our vendors sign on for all three festivals," said Andy Wilson, public relations director for Live 360. "Each rib cooker has secret recipes that they use to cook their meat. And it's not just ribs either; they also have chicken, pulled pork ... there's not another event like this one."

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***[Pg. 3: Partners and Admission Fees Come to Rib America Festivals Cont]***

The St. Paul festival, held July 28-30, moved to its present location on Harriet Island last year from Minneapolis. Angela Mens, event coordinator for the City of St. Paul, said attendance was down by about 50 percent this year because of the extreme heat.

"Live-360 was very pro-active and did some really creative things for us," Mens explained. "They brought in a dozen misting fans (large oversize fans that blow water to give a water mist). Then the park sat up water stations with sprinklers throughout the grounds to help people cool off."

Live-360 also made some policy changes this year, allowing people to bring water and umbrellas into the festival grounds.

Bob Whitt, executive director of White River State Park in Indianapolis, said he used to come to Rib America before he started working at the park where it is held.

"It's a great thing because we love to have large numbers of people come down and experience all the things we have at the park," Whitt said. "We had record attendance this year – 160,000 people over Labor Day weekend, Friday through Monday."

Whitt said the event is great for families, and the festival does offer some children's areas including kids games similar to those on a carnival midway. He said the food and the music also appealed to the kids who attended the festival with their parents.

"We have very few problems with the crowd," Whitt said. "For the most part it's a good fun loving crowd. The park is very comfortable and is a good place for visitors to throw down blankets on the grass versus the asphalt where it used to be held."

Whitt said the ribbers do elaborate set-ups for their booths in order to draw people to their area. Most of the time the vendors arrive a day early for set up. This year rain was predicted so Whitt said they asked them to come in earlier.

"We like to get vehicles in and out prior to any rain because if the ground gets wet we have ruts," Whitt explained. "Vendors were set up almost a full day in advance this year because of our weather forecast."

The barbecue pits for the cooks are usually in vehicles that have been converted into grills or ovens. Whitt said set-up and tear-down are easy. He said the vendors are required to pay for any damage to the park and everyone he has worked with has been very good about it. Load-out usually takes no more than one day.

"There may be the occasional grease spill or something like that, but these vendors are generally pretty good about taking care of the facility," Whitt said. "They are very careful when moving in and out not to damage the premises."

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***[Pg. 4: Partners and Admission Fees Come to Rib America Festivals Cont]***

Wilson said that Live-360 would like to expand Rib America to other cities where the festival would be a good fit. Mens said she would recommend the festival to other venues that are looking for a new event for their area. She said the event brings a lot of tourism to her facility and is great exposure for the city. People come to the park to see the festival and then they return to the park as a recreational destination.

"It's a great event. My staff and I do probably a dozen large festivals a year and this is our favorite," Mens said. "The promoters are great to deal with and have great follow through. What matters [to us] is the safety of everyone concerned and how sensitive they [vendors] are to damage in the park. Rib America is in it for the long haul. They are very respectful to us, our needs and concerns, and we appreciate that."

Sponsors at one or more events this year included Bud Light, Captain Morgan, Jose Cuervo, French Lick Resort & Casino, Coca-Cola, Tums, IUPUI, University Place Conference Center & Hotel, Republic Waste & Recycling Services, Smoking Loon Merlot and Pepperwood Grove Wine. — Vernell Hackett

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