

# **"SAFETY ON WHEELS"-The Mobile Attraction**

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Since my original article on Mobile Haunt Attractions, there has been an increased interest in this style of attraction. The Mobile Haunt utilizes semi-trailers in its construction. This interest is spawned by several different scenarios.

The prevalent reason is that of location. Many indoor, retail locations are becoming harder to obtain. If space is available it is usually in an undesirable location. Space in a desirable location is usually unavailable. Owners of vacant properties would prefer to leave the space empty and write off the entire possible rent, than make a reasonable short term lease from a Haunt owner. A Mobile Attraction allows you to set up shop in that busy retail space's parking lot so you end up with a desirable location at a fraction of the cost.

Another major factor in switching to a Mobile Attraction is the manpower and equipment savings. You have the advantage of a permanent attraction in that you can install props, effects, scenery and emergency systems, in the off season saving time and manpower. Setting up a Mobile Attraction can be done with a small crew in a couple of days!

Since this issue is focusing on Haunt Safety, let's cover a couple of safety issues pertinent to this style of attraction. There is an advantage here in that usually we are starting with an empty shell. We can install all necessary systems just as we need them. It is best to install things right the first time and avoid problems later. Another major advantage is we only have to install such systems *once!* Check your local jurisdiction ahead of time. You may be able to self-install some systems while others may require an authorized licensed contractor. Better to find this out ahead of time as opposed to having to remove them and have a contractor replace your systems!

Many of the safety issues and concerns are identical for any style attraction. Safety should be your number one priority. Just one accident and you may have a reputation you will never shake. One accident can effect ALL attractions. Just look at the Six Flags Haunted House fire in 1984.

Eight teenagers were burned to death in a Haunted House that was constructed in 17 trailers. Several factors contributed in this tragedy. Among them were the lack of adequate emergency exits and the widespread use of flammable materials. Reports state that the attraction was constructed so that you traveled 450 feet before reaching an exit! Rumors that there were blind paths would have required patrons to retrace their steps to continue their egress. This would have added to their confusion. There was an extensive use of foam rubber used to pad most of the corners in the maze. The foam would have released a toxic fume that could become concentrated in the smaller enclosure of the trailer. Other flammable materials used included various fabrics, plastics and even tarpaper which when combined allowed the fire to spread quickly and aggressively.

Although we now cringe at the mere mention of such practices, this was acceptable procedure in the early 80's. In a subsequent trial, the defense cited a report by fire inspectors which concluded that the attraction was safe for operation. Remember, even black plastic was a major acceptable barrier material then!!

All fire and safety procedures should be universal, whether you are in a tent, trailer or building. Adhering to these safety issues could have prevented the Six Flag tragedy. Adhering to these safety issues could prevent a future tragedy. Let's cover a few items that will be slightly different in a trailer scenario.

**Design:** In the Basic 6 Trailer Design emergency exits are designed so that no one is ever more than 50 feet from an exit. This alone might have prevented the Six Flags tragedy. If your patrons can get out quickly, there is a less likelihood of problems. We NEVER build in any blind maze ends that require the audience to have to back up. The maze design allows a patron to get to the next exit by constantly moving forward. The best way to avoid a problem is to prevent it.

**Electrical:** Because the trailers have no electric wiring, you start with a “clean slate”. You can pre-design the attraction to accommodate all necessary systems. Separate circuits can be run so that all effects, emergency systems, work lights etc, can be isolated. By isolating your circuits, in case of an emergency you can easily shut down all confusing lights and sounds by shunting one or two circuits. ALL electrical wiring should be run in conduit, hard or flexible, along the ceiling. By running the electric near the ceiling, you create more flexibility. Where ever necessary, you can drop a line without having to resort to extension cords. Electric lines may not have to be moved if you make slight changes to the wall configuration or room design. If possible have an electrical contractor install your system to avoid problems later.

**Smoke detectors:** Your smoke detectors MUST be interlocked. If one is activated, it must set off ALL smoke detectors. Most jurisdictions attempt to regulate us as a Special Amusement Building. Under these guidelines the activation of any single smoke detector or other fire detection device shall immediately sound an alarm at a constantly attended location from which emergency actions can be initiated including the capability of the following:

1. Stop confusing sounds and other visual effects.
2. Activate approved directional exit marking
3. Cause illumination of the means of egress with light of not less than 1-foot candle at the walking surface.

Activation of two or more smoke detectors shall automatically perform the above steps.

While this may involve a more complicated, hence expensive system, it may be easier just to shunt all power with the first smoke detector activation. This shuts off all confusing sounds and lights and activates your emergency lights and exit signs.

**Emergency Announcement System:** Being classified as a Special Amusement Building also requires an Emergency Announcement System. This system can act as a PA system. The system must be placed in a manned position, like your box office, so that if the smoke detectors or power goes out you can make an announcement to vacate the attraction. The easiest and most effective method is to use a professional PA amplifier that utilizes a 70 volt output with a battery back-up unit. The 70 volt system allows you to place enough speakers to cover your attraction.

**Fire Extinguishers:** We tend to “over do” the use and number of extinguishers. The NFPA guidelines state that you need one extinguisher for every for every 3000 gross square foot with no more than 75 feet of travel distance between extinguishers. That would only require TWO extinguishers in a typical trailer configuration. We place one in EVERY actor position. Normal procedures require that an extinguisher be placed in the open area, easily marked. While that may work in a normal work environment, it is very dangerous in a Haunt. They will either get knocked off or triggered by patrons in the dark. We explain that for everyone’s safety we place the extinguishers in the actor area where they are manned. Every Inspector has agreed and approved of our placement.

**Training:** This can be a major asset in any attraction. In regards to Mobile Attractions, we stress that we have a fire extinguisher, flashlight, exit map and emergency procedure checklist posted at every actor position. The exit map and procedure are laminated and mounted on the wall in each position. In case of an

emergency, each actor is to take his flashlight, move in the direction of the traffic flow taking all patrons with them to the nearest exit. This will clear your house quickly. In many cases this will also fulfill requirements of a manned fire watch.

**ADA Complicacy:** ADA compliancy will be dependent upon your local jurisdiction. It can be argued that due to the fact that you are a temporary mobile attraction, ADA rules are not in effect. This is because the ADA regulations are targeted toward permanent buildings to provide equal access to those with disabilities. Just as temporary carnival rides are not required to provide ADA ramps, so it could be argued that Mobile Attractions would fall under this edict. Be aware that NOT providing access to people with disabilities, even if not required, could have negative publicity repercussions.

ADA regulations state you must provide 12 inches of travel for every inch of height. The basic height of a semi trailer floor is 48 inches above the ground which would require 48 feet of ramp. Regulations also state that you can only go 30 feet before you must provide a platform and a switchback. This would then require two platforms, one at 30 feet and one at the entrance to your attraction. You will need a duplicate ramp to exit the attraction.

Just as in any other style haunt, you must adjust your hallways and maze to accommodate wheel chair travel. We accompany any wheel chaired patron through our attraction. A supervisor actually pushes the chair. This allows the patron to better enjoy the attraction because they are not required to concentrate on trying to maneuver through. It becomes sort of a private "Dark Ride". So you must find out if your jurisdiction enforces ADA or not and comply accordingly.

**Recap:** While many safety issues are universal, there are slight differences inherent to a specific design style. Too often we spend most of our time worried about what new scare or new scenic element we will create. This is what our audience pays to see. Safety, like marketing, budgeting and other "business" aspects always seems to take a back seat. But remember, they come to our attraction with the understanding that they will be *safe*. They want to be scared, but they do not wish to be harmed. It is our responsibility to provide that safe environment. A new scare or cool scene is useless if it is dangerous. Safety is and should be our top priority. As one inspector put it, "...safe is safe."