

Lollapalooza 1994: reaching out to a younger generation

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THE Lollapalooza tour is an alternative music festival with many top bands which travels across the United States during the summer, drawing 20-40,000 mostly high school and college-age kids to each venue. Although music is the main attraction, a tent city is erected at each site. Fans can enjoy visiting a poet's stage, a computer technology exhibit, activists' tables, and a host of vendors. It may seem like a curious thing for MAPS to be involved with, but for good reason, I spent some time preparing for the festival and travelling with it on four dates. I joined up with the road crew of Cannabis Action Network (CAN) and travelled with its "Planting Seeds" project. Also sharing the booth was a representative of Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM).

Objective

What was MAPS seeking by travelling with an alternative music festival? Mostly, we sought to educate young people. So many people have no idea that psychedelics have been used for therapeutic reasons, or they've seen the spiritual dimensions of recreational drugs, without seeing the bridge from there to healing.

Initial hopes

I hoped to give out information about psychedelic and marijuana research, and MAPS. I also hoped to sign up some new subscribers and ask for donations, which we wanted to at least cover our costs, and maybe more. Two booklets in a small format that could be given out for a two or three dollar donation had been prepared, entitled "Medical Marijuana Research Update" and "Psychedelic Drug Research Update". They contained edited versions of articles from past issues of the MAPS newsletter, geared towards a younger crowd's (anticipated) interests. I also brought along a few books which I hoped to sell, and planned to draw interest with a MAPS scrapbook and a colorful banner which was created by a volunteer, Carla Higdon.

A fortunate alliance

CAN's wildly popular legalization platform drew the most people of any booth on the tour, (as reported by CNN and Nightline). A constant stream of people came up to the CAN table asking what they could sign, or whether there was "free stuff" to take along. CAN collected postcards signed by concertgoers to send to the White House. These postcards implored the President to make marijuana immediately available for medicinal uses, authorize and commission research to study maximizing the effectiveness of marijuana as medicine, and to stop arresting people who use cannabis as medicine. Most of the people who came to CAN's table signed a petition (for medicinal marijuana), and signed a postcard, maybe dropping a quarter in the donation box and grabbing an information flyer before taking off to the next table, or the next band's performance. Sometimes they lingered over the hemp products and bought something.

One benefit of participating in large arena concert events is the potential for media coverage. CAN received such attention on

CNN and Nightline. People around the world were told on these news programs that the most popular booth at Lollapalooza was for marijuana legalization.

A disappointing reality

Because MAPS shared a booth with CAN, we got the attention of their crowd. Unfortunately, interest in the MAPS information was less than impressive, and donations were few and far between. The reason the MAPS table languished may have been the state of the audience at the festival. The young crowd (high school and early college) had a very short attention span. After all, they were there primarily to enjoy the bands playing onstage.

MAPS information is not immediately accessible. It takes a few moments to explain or to draw interest. Once I started talking about research, eyes glazed over. I would have gotten much more attention if I had spoken about how to trip on mushrooms. Sometimes I tried to build a discussion on the marijuana agenda and explained that a water pipe/vaporizer study was about to begin. Other times I asked curious youngsters if they knew that psilocybin had been used in a study with prisoners in the 60's. Few felt like sticking around to listen.

Two successful models

I had the opportunity to observe two effective booths. The models for action were right there with me, FAMM and CAN. Very few people have an understanding of mandatory minimums, so the FAMM representatives primarily spoke to people and gave out information, asking for small donations and selling stickers, buttons, and information booklets as an aside. This effort to educate Lollapalooza fans was made possible by a grant especially for that purpose. CAN had an easily understandable, uncomplicated and powerful mission statement (to relegalize marijuana), and subsidized its road crew's expenses by selling hemp products and memberships. Promoting products goes hand in hand with CAN's campaign to educate about the many uses of the marijuana plant.

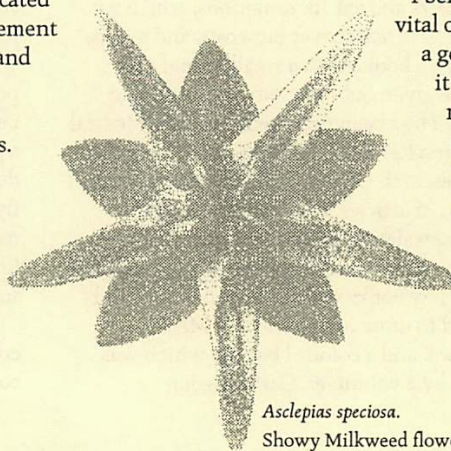
MAPS had neither a grant to cover expenses to distribute information nor products to sell, so *this was an experiment.*

Lessons Learned

The lessons about how to run a successful tabling and education campaign for young people are three-fold. First, you must have clear goals - is giving out information enough, or do you want membership donations? Second, a proper context is important. People are more likely to have an engaged attention if they are seeking out information, and less likely if they are in a "partying" situation. (The amount of times I was told that a donation couldn't be made because the person had to buy beer was stunning). For MAPS, a better context than Lollapalooza might be a tour of college campuses. Third, I think that young people feel more involved when they can sign petitions. The feeling of sharing in a community effort appeals to them. And when they can buy a product to further support an effort, they sometimes have more attention for what information you're telling them or giving them to read.

This brings us to an interesting point. The "disadvantage" for psychedelic studies and this kind of approach to fund-raising is that we don't have one useful plant around which to rally like the cannabis advocates do, or a simple message like relegalization. On the other hand, I wouldn't want to detract from the issue of research by having products cancel out information. This can be avoided, though. A very sharp pro hemp t-shirt exists, which features a list of uses for hemp. A similar concept could help educate people about the little known facts, common myths, and risks of psychedelics.

I believe that education is a vital objective for MAPS. Given a good opportunity to do so, it is possible to continue replacing fear with facts among the generation who has been told to say no but who can't quite believe it. The question remains - How should we try to do it in the future? •



Asclepias speciosa.
Showy Milkweed flower.