

CASE STUDY

MerleFest Streamlines Operations & Elevates the Festival Experience

Each spring, more than 80,000 people come together for four days of music, including 100+ artists performing on 13 stages. The festival celebrates Eddy Merle Watson, the son of music legend Doc Watson. Over the years, it has welcomed world-renowned artists from Dolly Parton and Willie Nelson to the Avett Brothers. But MerleFest is a music festival with a mission: “The festival serves Wilkes Community College and the state of North Carolina, with more than 70 nonprofits that benefit from being a part of it,” Festival Director Ted Hagaman says. Since the inaugural MerleFest in 1988, the festival has raised more than \$14 million for the college and community. In addition to supporting a noble cause, MerleFest is a family-friendly event where all are welcome. “MerleFest is about tradition and a feel-good, inclusive atmosphere,” says Tabitha Hudler, who leads festival Business Operations. “We have a 70 percent return rate each year, and many people plan their vacations around our festival.”

The festival is produced by a team of 17 people, who are responsible for not only MerleFest, but also more than 275 events that are hosted each year at Wilkes Community College’s Walker Center. “We have a diverse team of personalities that mesh well,” Hagaman says. In addition to the core team, MerleFest relies on the help of 4,000 dedicated volunteers. However, with a prosperous and growing festival, the MerleFest team



COMPANY

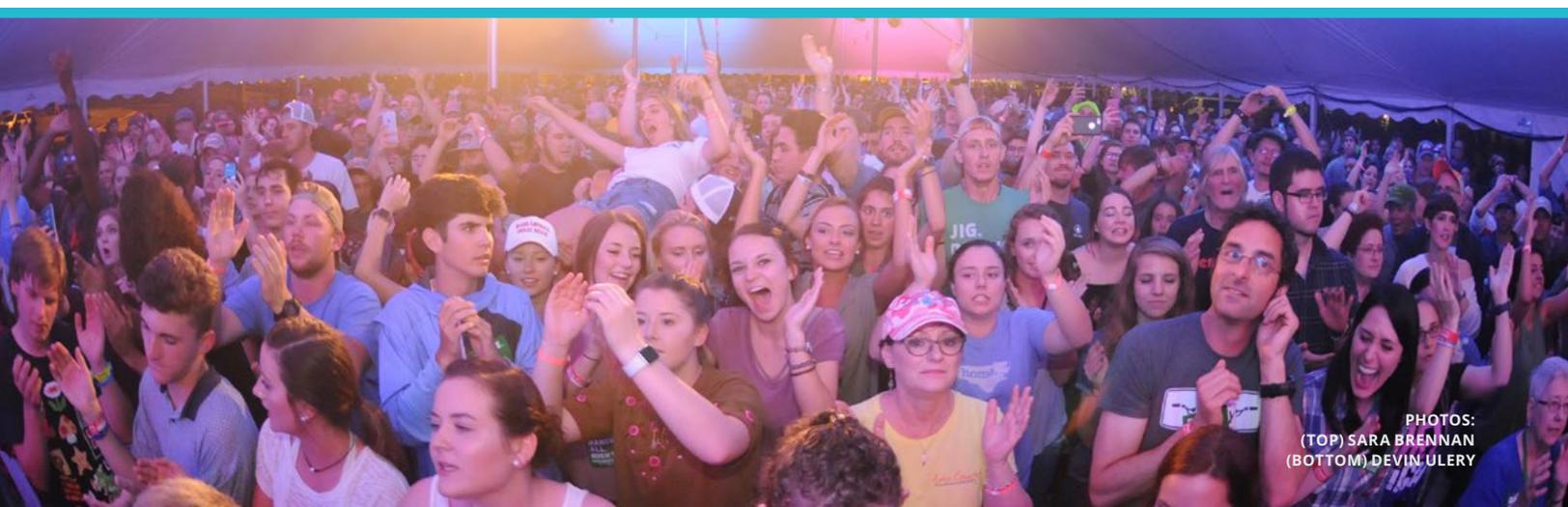
MerleFest
www.merlefest.org

TYPE OF EVENTS

MerleFest is a world-renowned music festival. Each spring, 80,000 people gather for four days of music—including 100+ artists on 13 stages.

SUMMARY

With a continually growing fan base, MerleFest needed a partner to streamline ticketing and operations. This then gave MerleFest more time to focus on a strategy to elevate the festival experience.



PHOTOS:
(TOP) SARA BRENNAN
(BOTTOM) DEVIN ULERY

sought a business partner they could grow with as the festival continued to evolve and raise the bar for the festival experience.

Researching and deciding on a new ticketing partner was no cakewalk. "I was worried we wouldn't be able to find a solution to meet our unique needs," Hudler says. With complex requirements that were essential to the festival, MerleFest investigated and interviewed 12 companies before landing on Vendini. "We talked with ticketing company after company and kept getting to a certain point before we'd hear, 'No, our system doesn't offer that,'" Hagaman says. "Vendini took a proactive, 'We can make this happen' stance, and they did." After meeting with the Vendini team to talk through their needs and unique setup, the MerleFest team was certain that Vendini was the way to go.

Support Each Step of the Way

With Vendini's support, the transition was smoother than expected. "I was a nervous wreck about learning a new system and getting our information transferred over," Hudler says. "It was reassuring to know Vendini was there to hold my hand each step of the way. Even now, I

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can call Vendini support to quickly get ahold of someone. When I call, I feel like I'm the only member that team helped that day. It makes a big difference."

A Platinum Festival Experience

When ticket sales open each November, MerleFest is hit with an influx of eager patrons. "We get a ton of calls in a short window of time," Hudler says. "Our staff works hard to answer as many patrons as possible. Having a custom queue for online ticket sales helps us ensure no one customer is waiting for too long. We pride ourselves on a great customer experience and have decreased wait time with Vendini. This is something our customers are thankful for."

Seat ownership is also vital to MerleFest and was one of the many reasons Vendini stood out. "We have around 4,000 reserved seats each year," Hudler says. "The majority

of those seats belong to patrons who buy a platinum package to get access to reserved seats and other benefits. We want to make sure these customers are taken care of and can renew their seats from the beginning to make sure they have the best MerleFest experience. If we had to start over each year, it would make for very disappointed customers."

Additionally, the festival attracts a large amount of walk-up sales. Vendini makes it easy to quickly sell tickets and get people into the festival. "We make the flow as smooth as possible with six box office windows," Hudler says. "We work hard to get customers in fast to enjoy the music." With more than 80,000 attendees, it also helps to have the Vendini support team on the ground at the festival. "The Vendini on-site team makes sure our festival runs smoothly, from our equipment to the scanning-entry processes," Hudler



PHOTO: RYAN CASE



PHOTO: JEFF CLEMENTS



PHOTO: SUZIE GUERRANT



PHOTO: WILLIAM SPARKLIN

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says. “Everybody is friendly and knowledgeable and no one gets overwhelmed by the crazy amount of traffic that comes through. Vendini has been a positive, customer-friendly change.”

Festival Communications & Securing Sensitive Data

Two added benefits that the MerleFest team enjoys are email marketing capabilities and the highest level of PCI compliance. “The ability to send an email blast from within the system is great,” Hudler says. “I used to spend two

days working on an email list and sending an email campaign. Now I can pull it together in less than an hour.” Email communications arm patrons with important information and help reduce patron calls and emails. “We use the time we save to be more productive in other areas,” Hudler says.

In addition, the top level of PCI compliance provided by Vendini helps ensure sensitive patron payment information remains secure. “Our state is under strict regulation,” Hagaman says. “It’s very important to us to be PCI compliant.”

An Exceptional Festival Experience Today & Tomorrow

“We live in a world where people expect convenience, speed and efficiency,” Hudler says. “It’s important to have a good ticketing partner we can count on so we can deliver the best festival experience possible.” The MerleFest team looks forward to a bright future as the festival continues to evolve. “In the future, we may implement RFID wristband technology to make the on-site experience even more efficient,” Hudler says. “There’s a lot of room to grow with Vendini.”

Serving their loyal fan base will always be a top priority for MerleFest. “We can’t lose sight of what made us successful,” Hagaman says. “There are many traditions that we protect and honor. It’s not easy in a changing world, but preserving our personal touch and customer-first approach is something that matters to us.”

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- Tabitha Hudler

Vendini makes the business of live events simple. We designed our all-in-one system to help organizations easily promote events, take donations, and leverage mobile ticketing and customer insights to deepen experiences with their audiences — and ultimately sell more tickets. Vendini is based in San Francisco, CA, with offices in Petaluma, CA, Los Angeles, CA, Boston, MA, New York, NY, Knoxville, TN, Vancouver, BC and Gualdo Tadino, Italy. To learn more about Vendini, please visit <http://www.vendini.com>.