

# Science with a *Twist*: Agriculture Takes Center Stage

By: Kimberly Meuleman

America's agricultural fairs have brought people and communities together to celebrate and learn from one another for almost 200 years. They are, by their very nature, educational and entertaining events. Today's fairs and expositions have diversified, offering hands-on experiences for youth together with the latest thrill-rides and amusements. However, agricultural education remains an essential part of the organizational mandate of fair events across North America. This tradition continues to influence how fair and exposition organizers plan their events — particularly agriculturally themed buildings and attractions. Petting zoos, birthing centers, 4-H buildings, and educational exhibits have enabled guests to connect directly with various aspects of farming that they may not otherwise encounter. For fair organizers, one of the most effective ways of helping new generations learn about the agricultural industry has been through interactive and hands-on education.

Tradition meets innovation in a new stage show touring the fair and exhibit circuit. "Funky Farmworks," the latest show from Mad Science Productions, builds on the rich tradition of agricultural fairs with an interactive and educational exploration of modern farming. The company's goal has been to spark children's imagination through multi-sensory theatrical shows that promote as much audience participation as possible; having children take part in fun, interactive science presentations. Mad Scientists explore the science of subjects with broad appeal for children of all ages, such as "mighty molecules," "wacky weather," or the "crazy cosmos." Humor and special effects help the performers deal with science in a way that children can really appreciate.

Extending the stage to include active audience participation generates a great deal of enthusiasm for the subjects presented.

While the company's shows have appealed to the fair industry for their entertaining and educational aspects, over the years, the industry has expressed the need for an agriculture-based show product. A great demand exists for creative and original ways to introduce children to modern agriculture. For Mike Bradley, the assistant general manager of the California State Fair in Sacramento, such "innovative entertainment based on agricultural science is long overdue at fairs."

The agricultural industry is complex and continually evolving. Science and technology have revolutionized farming, and continue to improve the efficiency and yield of production. Yet most North Americans know very little about farming and how they benefit from the

agricultural industry. This is not surprising considering less than 2% of the population is actively involved in agriculture today. Mike Teacy, chief executive officer of the Kern County Fair, believes that "with the growing urbanization of so many sectors in North America, a true understanding and appreciation of agriculture is essential to developing a healthy way of life." Finding new ways to emphasize agriculture's vital role in the daily life of North Americans keeps fair and exposition organizers



on the lookout for attractions that appeal to urban and rural visitors alike.

Introducing people to agricultural science in a 30-minute show while ensuring the right balance of entertainment and education is a difficult task. "Funky Farmworks" depicts the contrast between turn-of-the-century farming methods and modern techniques while emphasizing how science and technology have increased the potential and efficiency of farm production today. The show also explores some of the ways in which biotechnology

has advanced the methods of plant breeding, crop cultivation, and food processing. The Mad Scientists investigate these and other scientific innovations and the ways in which they have revolutionized modern agriculture.

While the company is confident that their brand of fun science can be applied to almost any subject, producing a show that examines the science of farming has been a great opportunity for the company to put its expertise to the test. "Our decision to move forward with this project was based on a strong market push," Managing Director Leonard Lips said. "Entertaining audiences with fun, interactive, science-based themes is easy for our company; trying to figure out which theme has the broadest appeal has always been the challenge. All the preliminary indications tell us that we have chosen the right topic at the right time."

"Funky Farmworks" is designed to give fair guests a new appreciation of agriculture, its advancements, and how both impact our daily lives. At the same time, its fun and interactive nature should hit the spot with fair organizers and their visitors. Entertainment and education are, in the end, the cornerstones of the agricultural show tradition. ♦

*Kimberly Meuleman is a sales and marketing representative at Mad Science Productions, Montreal, Quebec.*

