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HOW DATA
& CARDI B
AT THE
HOUSTON
RODEO ARE

BUCKING

TRADITION

SPOTLIGHT

HOW TIRELESS
MARKET
RESEARCH
HAS SHAPED
THE DIVERSE
CONCERT
LINEUP AT
THE HOUSTON
LIVESTOCK
SHOW AND
RODEO

DATA

IN THE

BY GIL KAUFMAN

WHEN YOU THINK OF the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, images of calf roping, BBQ, bareback and bull riding and a sea of endless 10-gallon hats, custom boots and shows by some of country's biggest names might come to mind. But Cardi B? Panic! at the Disco, Camila Cabello, Zedd and Santana?

It's all part of the scrupulously market-researched, meticulously planned three-week extravaganza that takes over NRG Stadium in Houston every winter that's not only the largest livestock exhibition and rodeo in the world, but also one of the city's signature events, rivaling New Year's Eve in Times Square, thanks to gaudy attendance numbers (more than 1.5 million in 2017) and the kind of artist

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Cowboys share the arena with A-list musical performers at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.



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lineup most summer festivals would give their flower crowns to land.

“In recent years we’ve been far more data-driven after completing a market segmentation study this year that served as our bible as we develop and offer new products, which also goes into building the lineup,” said Joel Cowley, the event’s president and CEO, adding that the rodeo is also expanding the surveys it does of individual customers to mine more data. Asked how to explain the 2019 lineup, which features acts that fall far outside the country demo, Cowley said the addition of pop-leaning stars such as Beyoncé, Justin Bieber, Black Eyed Peas and Fall Out Boy over the past decade-plus is actually in keeping with a long history of diverse bills.

From 1974 — which featured the Jackson 5 alongside Sonny and Cher, Charlie Rich and Conway Twitty — to the 1980s Urban Cowboy craze that swung back toward a more country-heavy roster, the show has always tried to mix things up to draw as diverse a crowd as possible while never forgetting its down-home roots.

Looking at the 44,000 season tickets sold for the past two years in the 72,000-seat stadium — boosted by a typical annual renewal number of around 40,000 over the past five years — Cowley said the majority were snatched up by country music fans. The rest of the tickets go to individuals on the loge and upper levels, with Cowley saying that “if we were to offer just straight country, we probably wouldn’t sell a great number of tickets because you’re really appealing to the same segment.”

Imagining 20 straight nights of country music, Cowley said most fans would likely pick the two or three artists they were most interested in, whereas the rodeo’s surveys have proved that non-country nights draw a younger, more diverse audience, with a higher ratio of visitors who’ve never been before.

“That equates to attracting a new consumer, and if we do a good job we might make them a fan,” he said of the annual civic staple, which has attracted big crowds since 1932. “If we draw them for a particular artist, and they enjoy the rodeo and the livestock show, and the shopping and the carnival, they might

“If we were to offer just straight country, we probably wouldn’t sell a great number of tickets.”

— JOEL COWLEY

come next year even if it’s an artist that only moderately interests them.”

Part of the reason the rodeo has continued to expand the base of artists it books is due to the demographic change that Houston has undergone over the past three decades, Cowley said, resulting in the most ethnically and culturally diverse metro area in the nation. That means new fans to expose to the event’s western and agriculture heritage, but also a chance to make all those demos feel welcome and inject some civic pride into the proceedings while casting as

wide a net as possible. It also explains relatively recent additions such as Black Heritage and Go Tejano Days, because “if those groups don’t feel welcome on that day they probably won’t come at all.”

While booking Grammy-winning rapper Cardi B might seem way out of the box, Cowley says the idea came after a close read of last year’s survey. “She did create some concern because of some of her lyrics and past history, but we booked her to entertain a certain audience that wants to see her,” he said. “And we spoke to her team and they said she’ll play a clean show. When we looked at the survey it was overwhelm-

ingly clear that there was a core segment that wanted to see her.”

The rodeo has been ahead of the curve in terms of capturing information about the entertainment lineup from at-

tendees for decades. Its recent market segmentation research has helped organizers break southeast Texas into seven segments, including “Texas Traditionalist” (more rural, love hunting and fishing, hate crowds, but love the livestock show), “Happy Homebodies” (not highly educated, don’t like crowds or going out, not easily persuaded to attend) and “Do-It-Alls” (younger in general, male, non-Caucasian, typically Hispanic, love going to events and spend money to travel in groups). The latter segment is where Cowley sees the most growth potential, and that’s where the careful planning of the music lineup can have the most impact.

Jason Kane, the managing director of entertainment for the livestock show, handles all the bookings with concert manager Brittany Cooke. The duo are now tasked with looking at least a year, sometimes two years, ahead to secure the kind of A-list talent that patrons have become accustomed to. After 12 years with the show, Kane said he’s come to rely on market research that the organization has been using for more than 40 years to book talent. He sifts through it to see not just who is attending, but what they liked and disliked, how that jibes with the demographic makeup of the community and, more recently, how it overlays with the census data they’ve also collected.

“Because Houston is now the most diverse metro area in the country — more than Los Angeles — we look over the horizon to find acts that will help reflect that diversity,” he said. “So because we are the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, there will always be a high percentage of country — it’s the basis of what we do — which is why our first look is to try to make the country side of our lineup look like the red carpet at the ACMs or CMAs.” Recognizing that 40 percent of the city’s population is Latino, Kane and Cooke make sure that group is also adequately represented in terms



Chris Stapleton played the rodeo in 2018 and returns for this year’s edition.

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of regional Mexican music, and pop in español — such as J Balvin and Bad Bunny — but also that they're hitting their diverse audience, which he says ranges from age 8 to 80.

"We try to zone in rather quickly on artists and I have a list of ones always ticking in my head that I didn't get this year or weren't able to the year before and I will go back if the timing is right, but we kind of get there quickly," he said. The country foundation is laid first and then he and Cooke start looking to isolate dates that would work for acts from other genres to keep

the mix interesting. Because the dates are set in stone once booked, though, Kane has to be assured that the artists will be available on that night, or else the whole mix is thrown into chaos.

As one might expect, attendance is better on the weekends, which is when the big country acts are typically slotted. That means the majority of the big-name pop stars are booked in on Tuesdays and Wednesdays when Kane needs some extra star power to fill seats. Not all the shows sell out — there are an average of 12 to 14 full houses a year — but a number of nights come close to capacity and gold badge-wearing volunteers are allowed to fill in standing-room spots if there is enough space. One closely guarded secret is the presumably gaudy talent budget, which Kane says he can "neither confirm nor deny" is north of the high seven figures.

After the success of Bruno Mars' set in 2013, which drew more than 75,000, Kane doubled down on finding mass-appeal artists from Latin to pop and hip-hop. "It's hard to deny an artist like Cardi B," he said, confirming Cowley's thoughts about the initial trepidation about the rapper's bold public statements, sometimes raunchy act and R-rated lyrics. "There was concern, because what's amazing about the Houston Livestock Show is the ownership the community has over the event — people don't just buy a ticket, they feel like they're involved in it and have a sense of personal ownership — so we were concerned about how they'd react to the lineup, which is a very important, marquee part of what we represent, but not the only part of what we do."

After a "very simple, clear conversation" with Cardi's team, Kane was satisfied that the livestock show would get the kind of PG-13 performance the rapper would do at an awards

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SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

THE CONCERT LINEUP FOR THIS YEAR'S HOUSTON LIVESTOCK SHOW AND RODEO.

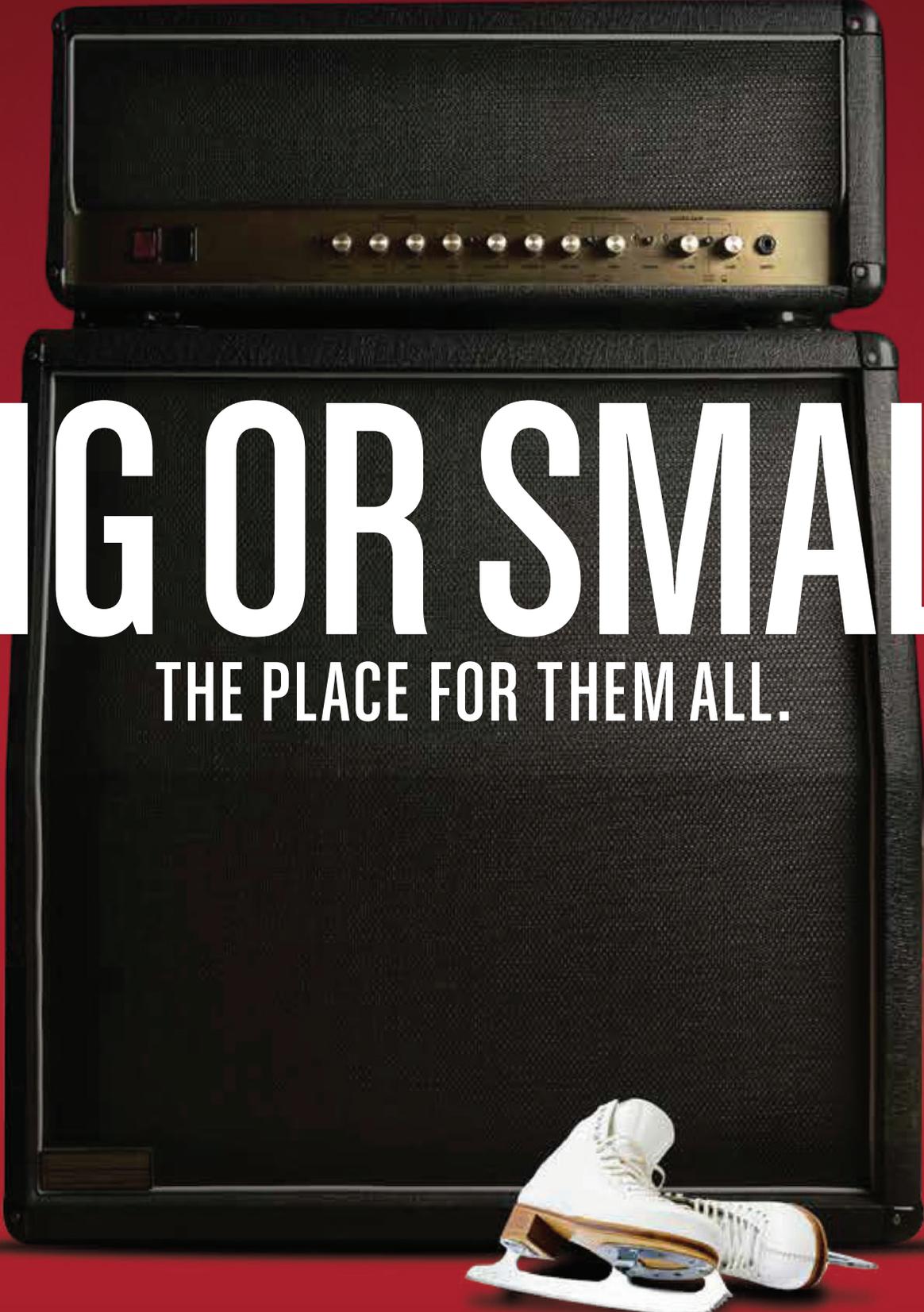
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BROOKS & DUNN	FEB. 27
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PANIC! AT THE DISCO	MARCH 3
OLD DOMINION	MARCH 4
CAMILA CABELLO	MARCH 5
LUKE COMBS	MARCH 6
TIM MCGRAW	MARCH 7
ZEDD	MARCH 8
KANE BROWN	MARCH 9
LOS TIGRES DEL NORTE	MARCH 10
ZAC BROWN BAND	MARCH 11
KINGS OF LEON	MARCH 12
SANTANA	MARCH 13
CHRIS STAPLETON	MARCH 14
CODY JOHNSON	MARCH 15
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A large black amplifier stack is the central focus of the advertisement. It consists of a smaller head unit on top and a larger cabinet below. The head unit has a gold-colored faceplate with several knobs and a red power switch. The cabinet has a large speaker grille. At the bottom right of the cabinet, a pair of white ice skates with gold blades is positioned. The entire scene is set against a solid red background.

BIG OR SMALL
THE PLACE FOR THEM ALL.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 42

show in prime time in one of her most unusual bookings to date.

“The NRG Stadium environment is compounded by the rodeo environment, with 75 yards of dirt between you and the first row of the audience, so one of two things happens: either the artist shrinks the stadium or the stadium shrinks the artist,” Kane said. “So we need someone who can put on a performance

and take advantage of the production we bring, which includes a brand-new stage we christened last year, plus our excellent lights, sound and video.”

Cowley said the breakdown of acts — carefully calibrated based in part on survey data and past performance — was 13 country and seven non-country in 2017 and 15 country and five non-country in 2018, with the mix morphing from year to year based on what artists are available.

Regardless of the lineup, the lengths Cowley’s team have gone to over the years to make the event comfortable and fun for the headliners has paid off. “I grew up dreaming of playing the Houston Rodeo,” said Luke Bryan, who is headlining this year on Feb. 28. “I’m thankful they have me back year after year. It’s a country boy’s dream!”

Bookings such as Bryan are a slam dunk, but

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ONE OF THE MOST impressive numbers the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo offers has nothing to do with concert attendance or total heads through the gate. It’s the eye-popping figure for volunteers, a small army of locals that makes sure every aspect of the event goes off without a hitch.

The first official volunteer committee was formed in 1938 to sell tickets and exhibits, but the majority these days toil on a variety of working committees that play host to livestock, horse show and commercial exhibitors and the general public, said Joel Cowley, the event’s president and CEO.

“It obviously offsets paid labor costs and saves the show a tremendous amount on labor that can be driven back into scholarships and educational giving,” he said of the 34,000 volunteers who offer their time and labor every year. When he arrived in 2005 there were 16,000 annual volunteers, a number that has more than doubled since then because volunteers were added to do the jobs paid contractors previously did.

The largest current committee, ticket services, has 2,100 volunteers who sell tickets throughout the grounds. “Every time we’ve replaced paid labor with volunteers, not only is it a tremendous savings, but they do it better,” Cowley said. “Any employer knows you can pay somebody to do a job, but they have to care and that’s inherent in our volunteers. You can’t pay them enough to care.” They provide a huge boost to the more than 2.5 million annual attendees to the show, with some selling discounted carnival packs that bring in \$8 million before the doors open.

There is also an auction committee that presells the animals in the show, as well as the year-round outreach committee, which sends speakers to civic events to talk up the show’s heritage and agriculture, as well as the Go Tejano and Black Heritage committees, which do public outreach to teach young people about the available scholarships.

“It really is a phenomenon to have 34,000 people in a fairly small geographical area supporting a cause out of the goodness of their heart,” he said.

Another point of pride is how many other livestock show teams attend the Houston Livestock Show to learn about

even possible to copy their volunteer effort anywhere outside of Houston. “There’s something about this city, that people take such pride in the community and they care so much about their fellow citizen that I’m not sure you can replicate it,” he said. “Those who can’t give money give time, and that’s directly reflected by our volunteer program.”

Two years ago, a delegation of half a dozen staffers from the State Fair of Texas visited to find out more about the rodeo’s volunteer program. They were specifically interested in finding out how Houston is able to tap into volunteers to help another crucial aspect of both events: fundraising for educational scholarship programs and efforts to promote agriculture.

“Fundraising is a key growth priority for us, and the two of them go hand-in-hand,” said State Fair President Mitchell Glieber.

“Any organization would envy to have that kind of loyalty from folks in their city to get behind an event like this, which has

such great benefits to so many kids in the field of education.”

The demographics of the volunteers at the Houston Rodeo varies widely based on figures provided by an Accenture survey three years ago, which found that the oldest group of volunteers (55+) was 75 percent male and the youngest group (21-30) was 75 percent female. The youngest group was also far more ethnically diverse than the oldest one, with the span of volunteers going from the very youngest junior members (17) to the most seasoned (80), contributing a total of more than 2.1 million volunteer hours to the event.

VOLUNTEERS TO THE RESCUE

their best practices for boosting volunteerism, information Cowley is proud to share. “We’re not direct competitors for the same consumer ... but from a consumer standpoint, San Antonio is three hours from here, Dallas is more than that, so we’re happy to share amongst these fairs and festivals. We’ll go to their events and borrow ideas. They’ll come to ours and borrow our ideas,” he said.

Cowley said the first question he often got was, “Will you show us everything? Because we want to do what you’re doing.” And he’s happy to do so, with the caveat that he’s not sure it’s

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there is one act every year that surprises Kane. They range from Pit-bull in 2013, who despite some initial resistance “rocked the house,” to Bruno Mars, whose booking came after nearly three years of back-and-forth with the singer’s then-manager, who already knew the “first-class operation” from his days booking the Jonas Brothers at the rodeo in 2009.

Kane and Cooke do the heavy lifting, but they also take advantage of the deep Rolodex maintained by longtime friend of the rodeo and veteran Los Angeles-based artist manager Jim Morey, who’s able to open some doors and make calls when necessary. Their two-person team ramps up to more than 25 by the time the show rolls around, including production staffers and contractors.

The show has a Houston marketplace for resale through AXS where season-ticket holders can resell unused tickets, which is not unusual given that most patrons are unlikely to attend 20 straight



Garth Brooks played the new giant star stage twice at the 2018 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, opening and closing the concert series and setting records in the process.

nights of music. So far, the biggest requests this year are for Cardi B and Panic! at the Disco, according to Cowley. Single lower bowl seats are priced at \$30 a performance (\$600 for the season) this year, with loge at \$25 and upper level at

\$20 a piece. In addition, there are premium Action Seats for \$125 a night that include food and water/soft drinks, and Action Seats in the front row for \$400 that offer same food and drinks, a spot in a take-home director’s chair in

the dirt during the concert and a steak dinner beforehand.

Cowley is proud of the eclectic lineup and crowd that the event draws every year, and proud of the city that it entertains. “That old image of Houston as a cowboy town with oil guys selling their last Rolex to drill another hole in the ground is totally different from the reality,” he said. ▣

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