



So You Want to be a Haunt Entrepreneur

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First Edition

Deadication

I would like to thank the following people who have been influential in my decision to follow my dreams and who have made a significant contribution to helping me keep my passion alive:

To my Mom, who through the years has always believed in me and encouraged me to be myself and accepted my uniqueness: Thank you Mom for supporting me in every “leap of faith” decision I have made and for always encouraging me with your words of confidence, support and love!

To my Dad, who sparked the love of the Halloween and haunt genre: Thank you Dad for giving me this passion to carry throughout my life and for memories of the joy and laughter we shared at Halloween!

To Becky, who holds a special place in my heart: Thank you Becky for sharing the passion for Halloween and haunting with me and for the many hours spent together on the patio dreaming of the haunt possibilities. Thanks for your ongoing support and your faith in my dreams!

To Lee, my soul mate and the person with whom I am looking forward to growing old: Thank you for the way you smile when you see me get excited about things haunt related. Thank you for helping me to revive the dream of owning a haunted attraction, over and over again. Thanks for sharing the dream with me and loving the journey we are on together. Most of all, thank you for being you!

Introduction

From Screams to Reality!

When I think back on my life and I try to pinpoint the beginnings of my love for the horror and haunt genre, I return to very early childhood where my Dad would set up the movie screen and film projector in our living room and show my friends and myself old horror movies, such as Frankenstein, The Wolf Man, etc. I also reminisce of the Halloweens where my Dad would build what at that time would have been considered elaborate home made props and sets on our front porch and scare the wits out of the neighbors. I think this is where I initially experienced the adrenalin rush of scaring and being scared; a true haunter was born!

Over the years, I've always had a dream in the back of my mind to eventually own and operate a haunted attraction. Growing up, one of my favorite rides at Disneyland was the Haunted Mansion, of course. In more recent adult years, my partner and I would organize and host incredible Halloween theme parties, with elaborate sets, sounds and lighting, which would be attended by as many as 100 people or more. All through my working life, I've always excelled at my jobs, especially where business matters were concerned. I love marketing and advertising, and I've taken every college course I could on the subject. At one point in my life, I decided to go back to college to study computer technology and was very successful working in this field for several years, although I never completed my bachelor degree, only falling short by 3 classes. I've always been the type of person to take the classes in my area of interest with no concern for obtaining my degree.

Eventually I decided that the computer field was not people oriented enough to suit my personal “wiring”, so I decided to leave the technology industry, somewhat, and I took a job for several years at a technical college as a Career Advisor. Although I really enjoyed conducting seminars and workshops, and helping students make a transition into employment in their new field of choice, my creative energies were beckoning me to something different. After a great deal of soul searching and introspection my path led me to move out of California to Eureka Springs, Arkansas to invest in an inn, which my partner and I focused many hours of sweat equity into renovating and decorating with themed rooms. I was unable to take time off of work to make a trip out to Arkansas to investigate the area before moving, so the first time I set foot in Eureka Springs was when I pulled into town in a 26’ truck with all of our personal possessions in the back. I knew I could apply my business knowledge and skills here, especially marketing and advertising. Most of all, I knew I’d have a creative outlet and I’d have the time to be able to pursue my haunting dreams as well.

As an owner operator, I was finally given the liberty to pursue other interests as well. Being an owner operator requires a great deal of time and effort, but it allows you the freedom to set your hours, organize and work around your schedule for maximum productivity. I began rekindling my interest in owning and operating a haunted attraction once again. Over the years, prior to moving to Eureka Springs, I spent much time on the online forums as a voyeur, paying close attention to the questions posed by other haunted house entrepreneurs and to the answers they were given from those with a great deal of haunt and/or business experience. All this information was being archived in my memory banks for future use. Now that I had the time and daily access to my computer without fear of consequence for personal use, I was able to invest time into introducing myself in the online forums and present my questions. I was overwhelmed by the welcome, encouragement

and support I received from my new haunt family. I was well on my way.

Once I decided that I was going to take the “leap of faith” and pursue my dreams of owning and operating a haunt, I began with one of the most critical parts of the process in business ownership, the business plan. I knew from business experience that if I was to obtain venture capital from an investor or financing from a bank, I would need to have my act together and present a strong business plan. Although preparing a business plan can be quite a daunting task, I found myself getting more and more excited as each component of the plan came together. The whole idea seemed to become more and more real as the business plan developed. As I compiled the survey data from the market research we conducted, analyzed the financials from the potential revenue vs. estimated expenses, and prepared the final financial information, I could see that this was actually something we could make work! From this point on, momentum took over!

From the point that we initially decided to purchase our haunted attraction, formed and named the business Eureka Screams!, LLC and the attraction Raycliff Manor, to the lease negotiations and securing a building, the negotiations and final contract agreements with radio stations and print advertisement, and to the point of issuing press releases, which resulted in a tremendous amount of free press and advertising, the time just flew by! Before we knew it we were purchasing a hearse with a trailer that pulls a huge headstone marquee and two Ex Mortis Stalkarounds and conducting publicity stunts all over the area. The dream was, in fact, becoming a reality. Of course, like any venture in life, this didn't come without its trials, tribulations and challenges.

As I mentioned above, due to the press releases we sent out to the media and press, we received a great deal of attention. We had a media night scheduled for our opening, which wound up

having to be moved back a week. What happened was that the company we had contracted to build the attraction for us had run behind in their delivery schedule and proved to be lacking in the area of communication. Without going into great detail, let's just say that we spent a Friday and Saturday night at the haunt location with nothing but an empty building and a lot of apologies to both the press, media and to the patrons who had responded to our radio and print advertising and arrived expecting a show. When we finally opened a week later, one of our actors lost his footing, fell and split open his head on opening night. We had to call for paramedics and shut down for the night. A couple of weeks later, a young man coming through the haunt assaulted one of our female actors and broke her jaw in three places. Fortunately, we not only took out the required liability insurance policy, but we also took out an additional medical insurance policy to cover our actors' medical expenses in the event of an injury. They say things come in threes; the third and final setback we encountered was the incredible amount of rain we experienced on Halloween night. Unfortunately, we didn't have an indoor queue line area for the guests and it was raining so hard there was a river running in front of the entrance to the haunt. Needless to say, we did almost no business on Halloween night.

The good news is that in spite of the challenges we encountered with our first year haunt, we experienced overall success. We were able to cover the first of five annual payments on the haunted attraction business loan, payroll for all of the Fright Team crew, the lease on the building we used, the cost of marketing and advertising (including the development of a web site), both liability and supplemental medical insurance, the storage unit lease to house the attraction in off season, and we were able to bank some finances for startup costs for the next year. If my Dad were alive today, he would be very proud. I may have even heard a few of his "Vincent Price" laughs in the haunt.



So You Want To Be A Haunt Entrepreneur

Chapter 1	So, You Want to be a Haunt Entrepreneur	PG. 09
Chapter 2	Business Plan, Business Plan, Business Plan!	PG. 13
Chapter 3	Choosing Your Legal Business Structure	PG. 45
Chapter 4	Haunt Theme / Storyline	PG. 53
Chapter 5	Purchase and/or Construction of Haunt	PG. 57
Chapter 6	Business Organization - Team Members	PG. 62
Chapter 7	Location - Lease or Buy?	PG. 69
Chapter 8	Safety / Fire Codes / Security!	PG. 77
Chapter 9	Advertising & Marketing!	PG. 91
Chapter 10	Insurance – Liability / Medical	PG. 123
Chapter 11	Recruiting Talent	PG. 131
Chapter 12	Accounting – Accounts Receivable, taxes	PG. 151
Chapter 13	Concessions – Promotion Items	PG. 155
Chapter 14	2006 Season – Updates!	PG. 159
Chapter 15	Resources	PG. 167



So You Want To Be A Haunt Entrepreneur



Chapter One

So You Want To Be a Haunt Entrepreneur

Perhaps you've been a home haunter and every year you can be counted on by your friends and neighbors to elaborately decorate your house or yard for Halloween. Maybe you're the person who throws the best Halloween party amongst your circle of friends, and everyone looks forward to the incredible sets, props and décor that seem to grow in number and professionalism each year. On the other hand, you could be a closeted Halloween or horror genre fanatic and you've always dreamed of operating a haunted house attraction. If you're interested in becoming an entrepreneur in the growing haunted attraction industry, or you've worked in the industry for a non-profit haunt and you've decided take the step of operating as a for profit business, this book is designed to help. Although this book is geared primarily toward the for profit haunt, the majority of the material herein will also benefit the non-profit haunter.

If you're like me, then you've spent many hours sitting around with loved ones or friends dreaming of how awesome it would be to own and operate a haunted house attraction. You've talked about the various themes you would incorporate into

your haunt and the designs you would implement. You've mentally engineered, or perhaps even done so on paper, the room and set configurations that would provide the ultimate scares. You've talked about the reasons your attraction would be so much better than some of the successful haunts you've attended. If you hold this passion for the haunt and horror genre, why not apply your passion into a business venture that can make you money?

There is nothing more exciting and exhilarating than working doing what you love! With Halloween now second only to Christmas in revenue spent by the public, having seen tremendous growth of the past several years, the haunted attraction industry has become a Halloween fanatic's or horror genre lover's land of opportunity. There is actually an international association dedicated to haunted attraction enthusiasts and business owners, the International Association of Haunted Attractions (IAHA). The quality of haunted houses has grown and changed with the industry as well. The garage haunts still exist today; however, many have evolved and continue to evolve into larger attractions that draw thousands through their doors every year.

Many haunted attractions throughout the United States are constructed in permanent locations, operating seasonally for six to eight weeks per year. They are successful enough a couple months a year to afford the owners the luxury of purchasing the property. Some attractions operate successfully several months out of the year and some are open year round. There are even Halloween or haunted theme parks that operate successfully with several haunted attractions in one location. What I'm saying is this; there has never been a better or more exciting time to tap into this exciting industry. It does require hard work, perseverance and dedication; however, if you know this is your passion and you possess a love of the genre, there is no reason why you shouldn't move forward to realize your dreams! As I share with you information to help you on your