brown pelican wifi

Nike Women's Marathon: Brown Pelican WiFi provided dedicated WiFi for this San Francisco event. It drew more than 25,000 participants and was the first in the Nike Women's Half Marathon series, which also hosted races in Washington, D.C. and Toronto.

10 Tips for Successful Event WiFi

By Marybeth Hall, CEO Brown Pelican WiFi

Why do companies do events for live audiences? There's no second chance, and corporate event audiences can be cynical (show me something new; make my experience worth every penny I'm paying to be here…). So again, why do we put ourselves through the rigor that providing our audiences with an excellent brand experience takes? Maybe we're adrenaline junkies, maybe we like to live on the edge, or maybe we just like to see amazing events come to life to have audiences get a true brand immersion.

Whatever the reason, events are an important part of a brand's story, and now it's not just about the environment, i**t's about providing audiences with everything they need to not only become brand advocates, but to feel they got the best experience possible.** And that means we need to everything right - including WiFi.

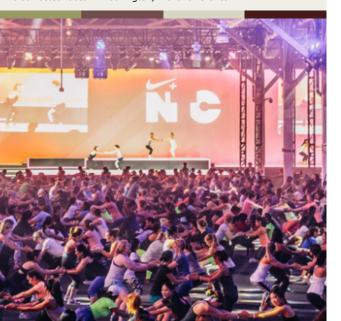**Here are 10 things to consider when you're planning your next event.**

1. Know Who Will Be Using WiFi & For What
2. Know Who Provides And Pays For Event WiFi
3. Understand What Venues Can & Cannot Deliver
4. Know What An Event WiFi Vendor Brings
5. Terminology - Know How to Talk About WiFi
6. Know How Much Bandwidth Is Enough
7. Know How Much Bandwidth Costs
8. Set Expectations & Know How To Coach Your Presenters
9. Know How to Communicate With Your WiFi Vendor Onsite
10. Understand the Effects Of Emerging Technologies On WiFi

Nike Underground at Women's World Cup: A secure and dedicated WiFi network was provided by Brown Pelican WiFi for this unique pop-u[experience in downtown Vancouver. This event enabled soccer-obsessed fans and players to experience the latest soccer innovations the brand has to offer and take part in a fast-paced, small-sided tournament. This even is part of the ongoing #NoMaybes campaign

1. Know Who Will Be Using WiFi & For What

<u>Determine up front who needs WiFi</u>
Know your audience, advance your brand. It's a pretty simple concept that we've all heard, but do you apply the same thinking to how you plan the WiFi for your events? Chances are you know you need WiFi, but there are so many other priorities that you're busy with that WiFi can become one of those "oh right - we need to plan for that" moments, sometimes late in the planning process.

If you want to provide the best possible experience, consider first who you're serving:

- Attendees
- Presenters
- Demos
- Exhibitors
- Press
- Production
- VIPs
- Interactive Experiences
- Dedicated Streaming

<u>How will these groups use WiFi?</u>
Ok great. Now we know who will be using the WiFi, but what will they be doing? We've done 200 person events that maxed out a 250 Mbps circuit, and 200 person events where we could get away with 5 Mbps.

That could mean a difference of thousands - or even tens of thousands of dollars - to your budget. (More on how to determine your bandwidth needs in a bit.)

Here are some common ways event participants consume WiFi:

- Light Internet Surfing
- Email
- Streaming Videos
- Live Access to Content
- Social Media
- Audience Participation
- Enabling Interactive Technologies (digital signage, wayfinding, heat maps, plus all the stuff we don't even know exists yet)

A WiFi Checklist can help you determine your WiFi needs. We start with this brief intake form to help you thinking about what you'll need. Check it out on our website.

2. Who Provides & Pays for Event WiFi?

We all know that WiFi is *expected* at an event. **The question isn't "Is there WiFi here?", but rather "What is the WiFi password?".** But who actually provides, and ultimately pays for, Event WiFi?

Attendee

In this scenario your attendees rely on their cell carrier to allow them to surf, post and play. This is a solution to consider if your event has a smaller headcount with less focus on technology-based presentations. While it will **keep costs down or even eliminate WiFi costs, it can leave attendees with a bad experience.** *Very low cost*.

Venue

Most event venues have a WiFi network in place. However, it could be outdated, not optimized for the high density environments that events demand, and in many cases there is no one on site to manage the network during your event. **Be sure to ask the venue important questions to help you understand what they can and cannot do for you.** More on this to come. *Moderate cost.*

Organizer

Yes, a custom WiFi network for your event can be expensive, but a fully managed WiFi network, plus your own dedicated bandwidth, will provide your attendees, VIPs, press, production, etc. with a reliable network that not only makes them happy, but **it assures that your mission critical messaging and experiences will shine.** *Most costly but most reliable.*

3. Understand What Venues Can & Cannot Deliver

You're providing your audience with an amazing brand experience, and in many cases your audience's great experiences are all about the environment.

I've always thought that the venue and environment is like the box in which your event gift is given, so it's no surprise that you spend a lot of time choosing the right place to make the statement you're going for. But here's the rub when it comes to WiFi: if the venue can't deliver what you need to bring your technology to life at your event - and provide your audience with the WiFi experience they expect - well, you know what can happen. Oh those surveys!

Or worse, what if your special venue HAS WiFi, and you're feeling all warm and fuzzy about it and checking it off your massive list, but it's not really intended to be used for your entire keynote audience to tweet simultaneously? Well that can be a problem.

And then there's the unfortunate situation where your venue says that your audience must go through THEIR splash page before they can get to YOUR WiFi network. Wait - whose brand are you trying to feature at your event? Yours or the venue's? And I'm paying what for WiFi at this venue??

Dancing With The Stars Finale at The Grove: Secured and dedicated WiFi was temporarily installed at The Grove, a popular shopping, dining and entertainment venue for the live taping of the Dancing With The Stars Finale.

Here are some things to be aware of before you decide on that perfect venue:

- Venue WiFi may feature the venue's logo on their splash page for login, not your brand's
- WiFi may be shared with guests (in hotels)
- In many cases, venues have an off-site networking staff with no monitoring during events
- House WiFi is not "tuned" for high-density environments
- Venues should allow you to bypass their bandwith connectivity if it doesn't meet your needs
- Many venues have no bandwith connectivity at all, which means it must be brought in from a 3rd party
- Venue WiFi may not be secure and private to your event

4. Know What An Event WiFi Vendor Brings

Not all WiFi vendors are created equal. The vendor you choose should provide:

- A dedicated, on-site team focused on keeping everyone connected
- Fully monitored network at all times during event hours
- Specialized equipment to handle high density environments
- Real-time reporting to allow for changes on the fly
- End of event data report for future planning
- Ability to rate limit as needed. Rate limiting is a critical way to manage the network, and involves watching the load by area, by SSID, and even by individual access point. Your WiFi engineer should be able to drill down to manage hostile devices and users who are hogging the network

Our philosophy is that if you have a critical need for the WiFi network to be reliable and able to adjust to meet the needs of the event, you can't afford not to have a pro on site managing the network.

We did an event for a large social media brand, and we were told before the event that there had better not be any negative postings about the WiFi network (there weren't). Can you imagine having your provider NOT there under those circumstances?

5. Terminology – Know How to Talk About WiFi

Bandwidth
According to Webster's Dictionary, "bandwidth is a measurement of the ability of an electronic communications device or system (such as a computer network) to send and receive information". An analogy might be to think of it in terms of hoses. If you use a garden hose to battle a large fire, chances are there won't be a good outcome. Similarly, if you're

trying to make the equivalent of the bandwidth you have at home work for 1,000 people... well, you get it.

Bandwidth, which is measured in Mbps (megabits per second), typically gets to a venue via either copper (older) or fiber (newer) cables. Once it's in the building, a WiFi network can be deployed using the venue's bandwidth by literally plugging into their router and setting up access points, switches, etc. The venue will have a set amount of available bandwidth, and you'll purchase a part, or maybe all of it, depending on tip #1 - how many users and what will they be using it for. Some venues will allow you to start smaller, and then "dial up" the bandwidth during the event if you need it (with additional costs, of course).

But what if the venue has no bandwidth, or not nearly enough to support your needs? Never fear - there are vendors who can bring in a temporary solution.

ESPN Superbowl Party: ESPN hosted a blow-out, VIP party to celebrate Superbowl 50 that included players, celebrities and a concert, and Brown Pelican was there with WiFi for the production team that made it all happen.

If you've ever looked at the tops of buildings in a city skyline you've probably seen a lot of towers and antennas. Many of those are powerful conduits for transmitting the frequencies necessary to "beam" bandwidth from antenna to antenna, creating a giant microwave grid. Bandwidth vendors use those antennas to harness bandwidth and transmit it to another antenna at the venue location, thereby providing temporary bandwidth to a location that otherwise doesn't have adequate capabilities. We

use this a lot in our work, as many event venues we work in generally don't have what's needed for the type of event needs we encounter.

The great thing about this is that you get a dedicated, licensed and secure chunk of bandwidth that is only for your use. The downside is that for all that privacy and security you may pay a high price. But, when you consider the alternative - a poor connection provided by the venue that may fail - which would you rather have?

In some cases, there isn't a way to beam that microwave shot from one location to the next (which by the way can be MILES). We've done events where the base antenna was 10 miles from our event location. And my favorite - from the top of the Empire State Building to Bryant Park in New York). **The inability to use microwave beaming is especially true of outdoor locations. So then what? Satellite is the answer.**

Satellite bandwidth is just want it sounds like - it uses geostationary satellites to grab the bandwidth and transmit it to your location. Right now, this is the most expensive option, but again, it's better than trying to run your event on MiFis.

Whew! That's a lot to digest. But we're not finished yet. All that bandwidth means nothing without a way to transmit it locally within your event. That's where the WiFi network comes in.

WiFi Network
In addition to the bandwidth, you'll also need a network of access points, routers, controllers and switches to distribute that bandwidth around the venue. That's the actual WiFi part. You'll be creating a WiFi LAN (Local Area Network), dedicated to your event attendees and other users.

SSID - *Service Set Identifier*
An SSID is the public name of a wireless network, where each network can be separately encrypted. This is really helpful when managing the network, because a good network engineer can adjust the available connectivity to the different groups at different times during the event.
Common examples of SSIDs at an event are:
- Attendees
- Production Team
- Press
- Registration
- Exhibit Floor
- Demos
- Presenters

6. Know How Much Bandwidth Is Enough

Bandwidth can make or break your event. The WiFi network is the thing that makes it all happen on-site, but unless you have enough bandwidth, the access points, switches and routers can't make the network more robust. Back to that hose analogy again. **We created a simple tool to help us determine the bandwidth needed, and it can be accessed** here. Keep in mind that while this tool is good for a baseline determination, your WiFi provider can help with some of the nuances that can affect a successful network.

7. Know How Much Bandwidth Costs

I wish there was a magic formula to let you know how much bandwidth costs. There can be a large range in price from venue to venue and type of connection – dedicated vs shared.
- Dedicated – This is a connection totally dedicated to your event, and the cost can range from hundreds to thousands per Mbps

- Shared – This is a connection that's shared with the rest of the venue (hotel guests, for example). The cost for a shared connection can be "free" as part of the venue or hotel contract, but beware! You could be subjected to using a shared, unencrypted network. Trust me, if WiFi is critical to the success of your event, don't do it. Would you run your event from the WiFi at Starbucks?

It's kind of like the Wild West when it comes to bandwidth pricing. Whether it's an in-house circuit or a temporary one, we have seen a 100 Mbps circuit cost $2,000, and we've seen it cost $100,000.

I'm not making this up. This is where your WiFi provider should be able to step in and help negotiate those fees. We do it all the time.

Infrastructure Buy-Out Fees
Some venues charge a "patch fee" to use their infrastructure if you bring in your own bandwidth and WiFi network. This is because the venue has made the investment in the network, and regardless of its efficacy, they want to be paid something for it, even if you don't use it. **You should negotiate hard with the venue to get that fee as low as possible.** Our clients generally put us in touch with the venue to help with

these negotiations because often, the hesitancy is that the venue has no idea what you'll be bringing in, and they don't what their equipment messed with. So unless you're very savvy, have your WiFi provider talk their language and give them the assurance that what you want to bring in is legit.

8. Set Expectations & Know How to Coach Your Presenters

This probably sounds like an odd thing to have your WiFi vendor ask of you, but trust me, it can make all the difference! Here's why:

Set Expectations
WiFi networks are designed to allow many people to do light surfing, email, etc. By its nature, a WiFi network is like a living, breathing organism that literally has to "learn" its environment. The antennas (APs, or access points), which are essentially radios operating on specific frequencies, talk to each other when the network is setup or reconfigured. Each AP can only handle so many concurrent users, so it stands to reason that the entire network can only support so many people at a time.

And - the network takes time to optimize itself once the traffic starts hitting it. That means when attendees stream in by the hundreds (or thousands), the network takes a big hit.

Nike GM Summit: This Annual GM Summit brings together 160 of Nike's global general managers for workshops, a speaker series, activities, and to discuss major strategic shifts within the company. Brown Pelican WiFi provided fully managed WiFi for this summit that took place at the Golden Gate Club.

Back to the hose - if you hook a garden hose up to a fire hydrant and turn the hydrant up to full blast, the garden hose is toast. Similarly, the network has to get those APs talking faster and faster to each other, but per the laws of physics, there is a limit. This can result in network degradation. **"The WiFi is really slow" is an unfortunately common thing to hear in the early hours of the event.** I won't pretend that this is a good thing, but it is a reality.

If you set expectations that there's a likelihood of a slower network in the beginning, there will hopefully be less anxiety as the first hours of the event unfold.

Coach Your Presenters
During critical times like keynotes, breakouts and demos, bandwidth should be managed to ensure the presenters have what they need, and the network needs to be managed so that those renegades in the audience aren't binge watching Netflix.

A very common thing we see over and over is when, even though we did everything possible to funnel the necessary connectivity to the presenter, they still say something like "ok now everyone let's download our amazing, new, 500 page catalog of our offerings". I'm not saying that you shouldn't have the presenter engage with the audience, but the network needs to be prepared - enough bandwidth for starters - and then a robust network setup to allow for the demands put on it. Pre planning is the key, and giving your presenters some advice in advance can alleviate a whole world of hurt.

9. Communicate With Your WiFi Vendor

When you're planning an event, who are the first

people that get involved? Creative? Production? Talent wranglers? Caterers? Registration companies? These, and many others, are critical to bring your event to life.

Yet somehow the WiFi piece tends to get left for later in the process. Based on what you've read about the potential pitfalls of the venue you choose, doesn't it make sense to get your WiFi provider involved early? **Give your WiFi partner their best shot at success by including them early and often during the pre production process.**

Here are a few basic tips:

- Have them sit on production calls when decisions are being made that affect the network
- Hook them up with any and all technology partners who will be part of your event
- When something goes wrong during the event, don't tell your vendor that "the WiFi is down" when it's just a few people having issues or fat-fingering the password.
- When there are issues, be as specific as possible – tell your vendor WHERE, WHO and WHAT is happening.

10. Understand the Effects of Emerging Technologies

In the world of immersive technology, things are moving so fast sometimes it's hard to keep up. Of course we want to delight our audiences with something new, fun and shiny, but we've seen those seemingly benign technologies take down an entire network. And trust me, it isn't pretty for anyone.

That makes it even more critical to communicate and involve your WiFi provider in anything you're bringing into your event as early as possible. In many cases, testing needs to be done prior to getting on site, so give your provider all the ammunition they need to keep it working. As I mentioned earlier, hook them up with your other vendors so the techs can talk with the techs.

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About Us

Brown Pelican WiFi is an event WiFi solutions agency with over 20 years experience coordinating, and executing events requiring complex and delicate WiFi solutions. Our specialty is providing secure, fully managed WiFi and technology solutions for events – whether in a conference center, hotel, park or on the beach. If you need wireless for a day, a week or months, indoors or outdoors, we can help. In a world that demands to be connected, our mission is to ensure a seamless, customized, elegant and 'sexy' WiFi experience at every event we are part of. Think of us as your IT Department for events.

About the Author

I joined Brown Pelican WiFi in 2013, the company my husband Glenn founded in 2009, after a 14-year career in the event industry, and I have seen it all. I worked on some very large events for major brands and learned the importance of event experiences. In my role as CEO and co-owner of Brown Pelican WiFi, I handle sales, marketing and operations for the company. Brown Pelican WiFi clients include Google, Nike, GE, National Parks Service, Samsung, T-Mobile, Avon, Airbnb, Twitter and Dropbox.