

Blog

Transworld Halloween and Attractions Show 2024!

Lab friend Susan Weidmann, PhD, reports from the world's largest Halloween expo, the Transworld Halloween and Attractions Show in St. Louis.

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13 June
2024



Fog rolls out the doors and the sounds of thunder, screams, and cackles fill the air. Zombies, cryptids, and other creepy characters wander the halls, while hundreds of people wearing Froggy's Frog lanyards and T-shirts with the names of haunted attractions wait early in line to gain entrance to the show floor. This is the America's Center in St. Louis, Missouri one weekend in early March at Transworld's Halloween and Attractions Show 2024.



Figure 1

After having worked in her family's company, TransWorld Exhibits' Halloween costume and party show for years, Jen Thaler launched a redesigned Halloween & Attractions show in St. Louis in 2009. A year later, she founded her own company, TransWorld Trade Shows. The Halloween & Attractions shows is considered the largest and premier event for anyone involved in the haunted attraction industry. This includes retail stores, the entertainment industry, or owners of some sort of attraction that brings people in for Halloween activities. Trade show buyers are looking for stuff to add to their attraction, whether that's a farm, pumpkin patch, corn maze, zoo, aquarium, haunted house, resort, escape room, family centers, amusement parks, or other. The trade show in recent years has grown to include the Christmas and the Interactive Entertainment industries as well.



Figure 2

Additionally, two non-profits make an appearance at TransWorld--Haunters Against Hate and Let's Scare Cancer. The mission of Haunters Against Hate is a nonprofit charitable organization that provides grants to help local nonprofits throughout the country service and support their LGBTQ+ communities, with an emphasis on youth. Their visionary goal is to eradicate all forms of prejudice, discrimination, hate speech or action against the LGBTQ+ culture in America and to educate people on the LGBTQ+ community. Let's Scare Cancer works to raise money to support people in the industry who are battling cancer, and was founded by Eddie McLaurin, owner of Woods of Terror in Greensboro, North Carolina after one of his staff was diagnosed (and successfully treated) with a rare form of cancer.

The Experience:

The TransWorld Halloween show is an event primarily for vendors and buyers in the haunted attraction industry, it is not a fan convention, such as Midsummer Scream, Texas Frightmare Weekend, and HorrorConUK. While many of those conventions offer cosplay, actor appearances, and booths with horror-related merchandise, TransWorld has a focus on the business of haunted attractions. With

over 400 exhibits to visit, and over 400,000 square feet of showroom space, there is something there for everyone to find. Business-focused vendors include insurance, ticketing and payment platforms, and haunt advertising agencies.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Some booths sell realistic animatronics of zombies, rattling skeletons, or creepy doctors; the one next to it may create small props, such as knives and machetes ; and others might be showcasing character makeup. The “Dark Zone,” is the main space that features the best and upcoming products, some of which can be up to 20 feet tall!

In addition to the show floor, the event offers a number of networking sessions and attendee events. The Networking Night Out event offers a roundtable style format, with different tables covering different topics. For the 2024 event, the wide array of topics covered included:

- Marketing
- Getting Started in the Industry
- Day to Day Business
- Scenic and lighting design
- Tech Talk
- Customer Service
- Booking Software and Ticketing
- Corporate and Special Events
- Puzzle & Game Design
- Ask The Expert
- Immersive Environments
- Expansion
- Management and Employees
- Buying and Selling
- Partnerships and Collaborations
- Open Conversation

Also on offer is the City Museum Party, a buyer's board breakfast, and the Dia de los Muertos costume ball, among other events.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

The Haunted Attraction Association offers their State of the Industry seminar, which highlights association activities, as well as offering summaries and insights to current events in the industry at large. This year, the seminar discussed the strategic plan 2024-2027 launch, which includes growing the organization membership, including in Europe. Other topics addressed during this session included the changing role of artificial intelligence in the industry, and the acknowledgement that advertising and marketing may be challenging as the US elections come up in the fall of 2024, given the level of division and misinformation around multiple topics that are rampant in the United States at this time. The rest of the session is devoted to a Q&A where members can ask questions of board members, who represent haunts of all sizes as well as vendors in the industry (pictured here with Spencer Terry, president of the HAA and Equity Owner and Manager of Fear Factory in Salt Lake City, UT).



Figure 11



Figure 12

- Held on the final night of the show, the HAA annual Oscars Awards banquet is held. This event is where the Association rolls out the black carpet and recognizes attraction owners, vendors, and other who have excelled in the industry. The award categories and 2024 winners include:
- Vendor excellence award: Savage Silicone, Inferno Effects, and Haunted Hills Productions
- Board of Directors award: Terror Roulette (South Barrington, IL; Terror Vault, San Francisco, CA; and Fright Kingdom, Nashua, NH)
- Special recognition award: Nick and Beverly Pappas (dubbed the official cheerleaders of the industry) and Canon Beazley, a young cancer survivor who has raised over 47,000 for the children's hospital that treated him, and who chose to attend Transworld as his wish through the Make A Wish Foundation
- Home haunt award: Stanley Haus
- Lifetime achievement: Ben Armstrong, of Netherworld Haunted House in Atlanta, GA

Education sessions:

Multiple seminars are also available for free or purchase, with over sixty offerings in 2024. These educational seminars discuss topics ranging from how to run a business in the haunted house industry, marketing and advertising a haunt, to the art of scaring people. Sponsored by the Haunted Attraction Association, a popular seminar is the Certified Haunted Attraction Operator Safety (C.H.A.O.S.) Program. The program is summarized by the HAA as:

The Certified Haunted Attraction Operator Safety (C.H.A.O.S.) Program is the Haunted Attraction Association (HAA)'s safety certification course that is recommended to anyone running a haunted attraction. This 4-hour Fire & Safety seminar is mandatory for certification. Safety, liability concerns, fire marshal issues, and proper methods of building a safe event are keys to this seminar. The seminar also covers tragedies that have affected the rules and laws that now regulate haunted house/entertainment/dark attractions today.

Individuals must complete eight hours in order to receive full CHAOS certification, so four additional hours/credits/seminars are required. Once completed, you will receive a CHAOS Course Completion Certificate to show your fire marshal, insurance carrier, and local authorities to show your desire to run a safe haunted attraction. Each person must attend the 8 hours individually and hour credits cannot be shared or combined between staff from the same attraction/different individuals.

To be eligible for the HAA Top Haunts program, at least one staff member must have current CHAOS certification. Several insurance companies in our industry now offer discounts for owners/operators with up-to-date CHAOS certification. Effective March 2020, all CHAOS certificates are valid and current for three years. All previously issued CHAOS certificates will expire after March of 2023. Your dedication and certification in the C.H.A.O.S. Program helps your event, and our industry, strive to be safe, proactive and responsible.

The educational seminar offerings are extensive and increasing each year. I attended a few interesting and informative sessions this year on a variety of topics. In one seminar, Amy Hollaman and Brett Bertolino of 13th Floor Entertainment Group talked about the guest experience and customer service. Some of the points they make are that every interaction a customer has with staff has the potential to impact their experience positively or negatively. Everything the customer sees, hears, smells, tastes, or touches at an event impacts their experience, and improving guest satisfaction will lead to increased length of stay, repeat visitation and ultimately increased revenue. In this seminar they discussed the strategies that have proven successful in delivering an exceptional visitor experience at some of the largest Halloween events from coast to coast.



Figure 13

Another session I attended was delivered by Allen Hopps of Dark Hour Haunted House and Stiltbeast Studios. Entitled 'Super Scares', Allen revealed tweaks that will make your show scarier: From simple scares to psychological terror, he talked

about things that will instill terror and dread in guests. This included 15 scares that you can place right into your show regardless of theme and are designed to make an attraction's next season awesome.

Jon Cooke, of Plague Productions, walked his class through a pre-visioning exercise, to help participants discover the transformative potential of pre-visualization techniques in project design. This exercise helped people gain valuable insights as they were guided through a comprehensive exploration of techniques such as layouts, concept art, and 3D modeling. Participants were taught to seamlessly integrate these methods into their creative process, empowering them to organize and effectively communicate a strategic roadmap for projects.

Attending TransWorld is an opportunity to connect with other industry professionals, tour local haunted attractions in the St. Louis area, purchase supplies for the upcoming haunt season, and become inspired by the energy and creativity that abounds in the fear for fun industry and should not be missed by anyone involved or interested in the haunted attraction industry. See you in St. Louis in 2025!