Preventing a potential terrorist attack: ESTA members are on the front line

BY MIKE KELLY

WHEN IT COMES TO PREVENTING A TERRORIST ATTACK at a live event, everyone plays a part. That fact rings particularly true for members of the Entertainment Services and Technology Association (ESTA) who are on the front lines. While there might not be a magic formula to prevent an act of terror during a live event, one thing remains undisputed: vigilance is the name of the game. It’s that same vigilance that will help ensure the experience is an enjoyable one for all, including attendees.

Part of enjoying a live event experience is feeling safe. Whether it’s conscious or assumed, people have an expectation of safety and security. The average concert- or festival-goer isn’t thinking about, “what if there is a terrorist event here today?” Instead, their focus is on the event itself—the sights, sounds, and musings around them. They may not necessarily be concerned with the logistics on the surface (construction, lighting, rigging, sound, etc.), but there is an unspoken understanding that everyone—from venue managers to ground crews and everyone in between—will be committed to their well-being. That means doing whatever possible to prevent an attack.

Similar to the construction of a live event, preventing a terrorist attack is a team effort. It includes people in the front-of-house, backstage, and behind the scenes in addition to a strong and well-orchestrated plan from house security. The solution is in knowing how to prevent an act of terror and having a game plan to respond if it becomes necessary. Professional associations that specialize in safeguarding against a terror event will tell you that prevention is quite possibly the most important component to any risk-mitigation strategy. And prevention can usually be distilled down to common sense and responsibility that extends across all aspects of

Darkness, flashing lights, and loud music can make identifying troublemakers difficult, but a vigilant crew often can spot people who are not where they are supposed to be.
event management, not just venue managers—everyone from the security team to the riggers and the AV crew are in the best position to identify suspicious behavior as a first line of defense. In essence, implementing proactive procedures likely to dissuade, stop, identify, or apprehend a potential terrorist are far more effective than a reactive program intended to minimize the damage once such an event has begun.

The following tips and best practices are widely regarded by homeland security officials, first responders, the legal community, and law enforcement, as the main tenets in thwarting a potential terrorist attack:

**It all starts with the load-in**

Every time ESTA members help put on a live event, they start with the load-in. The same is true of preventing an act of terror. To borrow from an old sports adage, the best offense is a good defense. For event preparation that means ensuring house security has a plan in place. They should be aware and attentive during load-in so that they can recognize and address any people or activities that appear “off.”

Taking it one step further, it’s helpful for venue managers to have vetting protocol at load-in. More often than not, security pass protocol doesn’t begin until the day before the show. But most industry sources, including ProSight Specialty Insurance, recommend that this process is instituted well in advance of the show. It doesn’t have to be particularly robust or as comprehensive as a background check at the individual contractor level, but something as simple as a process or protocol of issuing wristbands or lanyards well before load-in to make it easier to discern who belongs and who doesn’t. This kind of highly visible screening procedure is widely regarded by experts as a very effective tool in minimizing the potential for a catastrophe.

For those on the ESTA side who are working during load-in or prep, it’s important that they remain aware of their surroundings. It’s easy to be laser-focused on the task at hand and not pay attention to what’s going on elsewhere in the house; everyone—from riggers to electricians and sound technicians—need to have a wider range of focus, outside of their individual task and perimeter. For example, even though an electrician or sound technician may be assigned to work in a certain area—maybe it’s the hallway, maybe it’s backstage, or in the rafters—that doesn’t mean that they can’t stay alert when perusing other locations of the venue as well.

**If someone sees something, the onus is on them to say something.**

It’s also important for anyone overseeing load-in to know which trades are on-site and at what time; if someone looks out of place, ask them who they are working with. One thing we recommend to our customers is to make the tradespeople (contractor and subcontractor alike) recognizable on the job site. Encourage them to wear distinct and identifiable clothing (e.g., hard hat, jacket, or vest) so that there is an element of uniformity. This way, anyone who doesn’t belong at the venue will likely stand out. The same thing goes for work trucks. In most active terror situations, the offenders will have cased the venue days or weeks in advance. If work trucks are emblazoned with identifiable logos, private non-descript vehicles should stand out, be reported, and be checked out by security.

**Assume the “airport” mentality**

As event set-up progresses, the level of vigilance and engagement evolves. ESTA members are encouraged to keep a watchful eye over their tools, machines, and belongings. For example, if someone walks away from their equipment, it is advisable to double check that the lock box is secured. In the case of mobile equipment, they should take their keys with them when they walk away. In an industry where many of the workers already know each other, it is easy to be complacent or feel impenetrable. But, the expectation is that everyone should be doing everything possible to prevent unwanted access, even if that means being more inquisitive about the presence of individuals working in the same environment. Keeping access to main areas and equipment restricted is paramount; this can only happen if everyone plays an active role in monitoring the area.
Another good rule of thumb to follow is to assume an “airport mentality.” Every worker at every level should feel empowered to report suspicious behavior. If ESTA members see unaccompanied work equipment or a duffel bag, they should bring it to the attention of the proper authorities. It’s not as difficult as one might think for someone to get up into the rigging when no one is watching and plant a hazardous package, backpack, etc. It’s best to keep a close eye on all surroundings and to have a constant understanding of who the authorities are on site, and where they can be found at any given time. If someone sees something, the onus is on them to say something.

Go beyond standard security measures during the event

The third and final component to helping prevent a terrorist attack comes during the event itself, specifically at the varying security checkpoints positioned throughout the venue. In more cases than not, an ESTA member might not have an entire crew when the event is actually happening. They may end up floating backstage or around the perimeter. Regardless of where their job takes them on-site, they need to remain aware of who and what is entering the venue; they can help be an extension of security’s eyes and ears. This is the perfect opportunity to go above and beyond standard operating procedures to express concern for things that seem out of place—bulky jackets, backpacks, oversized bags, etc. Make sure security acknowledges and is aware of these potentially suspicious items. For events with a larger profile, security efforts may be amplified even further. For example, last year’s Super Bowl had uniformed military personnel armed with automatic weapons at every potential point of entry. Blackhawk helicopters patrolled the airspace around the stadium. While these precautions were implemented to ensure a means of responding to any attack, the broader-reaching effect was the impact it had on everyone in the vicinity of the venue. The message was clear that everyone—including workers—was under close scrutiny and responsible for the safety of attendees.

Once these key considerations have been mastered, it’s time to put them into action. As with any good game plan, it’s helpful to have a team huddle prior to the day’s activities. In fact, safety meetings are a critical component of any and every safety program. While verbal communications throughout the workday afford an opportunity to address safety issues, a formal safety meeting at the start of each day can address the potential hazards associated with the tasks scheduled for that day, and it also allows for proper documentation spotlighting the fact that safe work procedures have been discussed. Although a seemingly small detail, countless lawsuits are lost each year due to contractors’ inability to provide adequate documentation to refute allegations that safe work procedures were not discussed. The documentation of these meetings should include topics covered and the signatures of the attendees. If written documentation is impractical, video documentation is an easy way to record the conversation and the images of those in attendance. In addition to outlining the exposures likely to be encountered during the upcoming day, the agenda should cover past incidents that have occurred on the job and the means by which they should have been prevented.

Reducing the potential of a terrorist attack during a live event starts with prevention, and though there isn’t a secret sauce per se it all comes down to education and awareness. From set-up to take-down and everything in between, everyone—especially ESTA members—are in a great position to help keep each other and the communities they serve safe.

To learn more about customized insurance solutions for entertainment technology professionals, please visit: http://esta.prosightspecialty.com/.

Mike Kelly is a Risk Control Manager in the Live Media niche at ProSight Specialty Insurance, where he manages coverage programs for indoor and outdoor live events. He has more than 25 years of experience in entertainment insurance and is a Certified Safety Professional (CSP) and a Certified Entertainment Industry Fire Safety Officer (FSO). He holds a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in Marine Biology from Cal State University Long Beach.