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SPRING/SUMMER 2025
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FAIR NEWS

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TOP 10 UNDER 40

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Canadian Fair News | Spring/Summer 2025 Edition

The Canadian Association of Fairs and Exhibitions / Association canadienne des foires et expositions

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President's Message

By Allison Wright, President, **CAFE**

It's here...my favourite time of year! Across the country, our members are deep into fair season: preparing, planning, and presenting unforgettable experiences that bring our Canadian communities together and showcase the heart of our sector.

We're out there preparing fairgrounds and parking lots, training employees and volunteers, and reminding our neighbours that the fair is coming! We're planning all the details: marketing campaigns, gate pricing, daily schedules, menus, inventory, emergency protocols, and yes, backup plans - just in case!

And when our gates open, it's our service members and suppliers who help bring these plans to life, transforming hard work into meaningful moments for millions of fairgoers.

At the same time, the CAFE team has been busy engaging members on important initiatives, including the governance review and planning for what promises to be a fantastic 2025 Convention in Calgary. We've also begun laying the groundwork for our next strategic planning cycle as we look ahead to the conclusion of our current plan in 2026. A sincere thank you to the Board and our Executive Director, Linda Sicoli, for their time, ideas, and energy during our May board meeting.

Back at home, we had a team breakfast this week for our programming division. I was the head pancake chef which is quite fitting, really, since we're in the business of creating experiences for millions of guests each year. We talked about what to expect over the next month: what to wear, how to use the shuttle, and most importantly, how to support each other. I also reminded the team of something I learned from my first manager at the Calgary Stampede, Don Stewart: "The key to surviving long days in cowboy boots is to change your socks once a day!" It's a small thing, but it stuck. I've done it every day during the fair for 25+ years.

No matter how well you plan, something will go sideways. But we are ready. You are ready. Take care of yourself and your team. Lean on your CAFE community, reach out when you need to, and above all, remember the reason we do this - because we love it and because it matters.

As the season takes hold, stay focused, and keep doing what you do best.

And don't forget to change your socks!

Until next time.

"If you can visualize it, if you can dream it, there's some way to do it" – Walt Disney

Allison Wright

President

Message de la présidente

Par Allison Wright, Présidente- ACFE



Nous voici, à ma période préférée de l'année. Partout au pays, nos membres sont en pleine saison des foires. Ils préparent, planifient et nous offrent des expériences inoubliables qui rassemblent nos communautés canadiennes et mettent en valeur, le cœur de notre secteur.

Nous sommes en train de préparer les terrains de foire et de stationnement et nous formons les employés et les bénévoles tout en rappelant à nos voisins que la foire arrive! Nous planifions tous les détails : campagnes de marketing, frais de porte d'entrée, horaires quotidiens, menus, inventaire, protocoles d'urgence et, bien sûr, des plans de secours juste au cas où! Et lorsque nos portes s'ouvrent, ce sont nos membres et nos fournisseurs qui contribuent à donner vie à ces plans, transformant leur travail acharné en moments significatifs pour des millions de visiteurs de la foire.

Parallèlement, l'équipe d'ACFE a été très occupée, engageant les membres dans des initiatives importantes, notamment l'examen de la gouvernance et la planification de ce qui promet d'être une magnifique convention 2025 à Calgary. Nous avons également commencé à poser les bases de notre prochain cycle de planification stratégique alors que nous envisageons la conclusion de notre plan actuel en 2026. Un sincère merci au conseil d'administration et à notre directrice exécutive, Linda Sicoli, pour leur temps, leurs idées et leur énergie lors de notre réunion du conseil d'administration en mai.

A notre retour, nous avons organisé un petit-déjeuner d'équipe cette semaine pour notre service de programmation. J'étais chef des crêpes, ce qui est plutôt approprié puisque notre métier est de créer des expériences pour des millions de visiteurs à chaque année. Nous avons parlé de ce à quoi s'attendre au cours du mois prochain, de ce qu'il faut porter, comment se servir de la navette et surtout de la façon de se soutenir les uns les autres. J'ai également rappelé à l'équipe, une leçon de Don Stewart, mon premier gérant au Stampede de Calgary : « La clé pour survivre aux longues journées en bottes de cowboy, c'est de changer ses chaussettes une fois par jour. » C'est un petit geste mais j'y tiens et c'est une habitude que je fais à tous les jours pendant la foire depuis 25 ans.

Quelle que soit votre planification, un imprévu peut survenir mais nous sommes prêts et vous l'êtes aussi. Prenez soin de vous et de votre équipe. Appuyez-vous sur votre communauté d'ACFE. Contactez-nous au besoin et surtout, n'oubliez pas la raison pour laquelle nous faisons cela : c'est parce que nous aimons cela et c'est important pour nous.

Alors que la saison s'installe, restez concentrées et continuez à faire ce que vous faites le mieux!

Et n'oubliez pas de changer vos chaussettes.

A la prochaine.

“Si vous pouvez le visualiser, si vous pouvez le rêver, il y a un moyen de le faire” – Walt Disney

Allison Wright

Présidente



Executive Director's Message

By Linda Sicoli, Executive Director, **CAFE**

As we step into another fair season, there's a palpable sense of momentum across the Canadian fairs and exhibitions sector. Despite the everchanging landscape that many of us face, what continues to shine through is the tenacity, passion, and creativity of our members. Whether in small agricultural societies and fairs or large-scale exhibitions, you are each doing the critical work of celebrating rural heritage, showcasing agricultural excellence, and creating spaces where community thrives.

This spring and summer, CAFE is focused on initiatives that support and elevate that work. I'm especially excited about the Top 10 Under 40 recognition program. Returning after some time, this initiative is more than an award, it's an indication of where we're going as a sector. The nominees we've received demonstrate that the future of Canadian fairs is in good hands. These emerging leaders bring not only new energy, but a deep understanding of how our traditions can evolve to meet today's realities, from embracing technology and sustainability to creating more inclusive, welcoming spaces for all Canadians.

Meanwhile, preparations are well underway for our 2025 National Convention in Calgary, and I'm thrilled to share that it will be one of our most interactive and future-focused gatherings to date. With the theme Saddle Up for Tomorrow, this year's program is built around forward-looking leadership, audience engagement strategies, technological innovation, and sector resilience. Expect a mix of high-impact speakers, actionable workshops, and dynamic networking, all aimed at helping you navigate change and harness opportunities in your own organization.

As I approach my one-year mark with CAFE this July, I've been reflecting on this new journey. My background in agricultural and tourism-focused economic development gave me a front-row seat to the impact that fairs and exhibitions have, not just as events, but as drivers of rural vitality, cultural connection, and community pride. What keeps me inspired is seeing how deeply rooted this work is in people's lives, and how much potential there is to carry it forward. It's an honour to support a sector that continues to evolve while staying true to its roots.

Here at CAFE, we see you. We see the long hours, the creative problem-solving, the emotional labour of stewarding spaces that matter, not just economically, but socially and culturally. As the season kicks off, engage with your CAFE community for inspiration, support, and connection. Together, we are shaping a future for fairs that is vibrant, inclusive, and firmly rooted in both heritage and innovation.

Wishing you all a safe, successful, and spirited fair season.

“The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason to hope” – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Linda Sicoli

Executive Director

Message de la Directrice Exécutive

Par Linda Sicoli, ACFE



Alors que nous entrons dans une autre saison des foires, il existe un sentiment palpable de dynamisme dans le secteur canadien des foires et d'expositions. Malgré le fait que plusieurs d'entre nous sommes confrontés par un paysage qui est en constante évolution, la ténacité, la passion et la créativité de nos membres continuent à briller. Que ce soit dans les petites foires ou dans de grandes expositions, vous faites chacun un travail essentiel à célébrer le patrimoine rural. Vous mettez en valeur l'excellence agricole et créez des espaces où les communautés prospèrent.

Durant cette saison estivale, l'ACFE se concentre sur les initiatives qui soutiennent et valorisent ce travail. Je suis particulièrement enthousiasmée par le « Programme de reconnaissance des 40 meilleurs de moins de 40 ans ». De retour après un certain temps, cette initiative est plus qu'une récompense et aussi un indicateur de la direction que prend notre secteur. Les nominations que nous avons reçues démontrent que l'avenir des foires canadiennes est entre de bonnes mains. Ces leaders émergents apportent, non seulement une nouvelle énergie, mais aussi une compréhension profonde de la façon dont nos traditions évoluent pour répondre aux réalités d'aujourd'hui, de l'adoption de la technologie et la durabilité ainsi qu'à la création d'espaces plus inclusifs et accueillants pour tous les Canadiens.

Présentement, les préparatifs vont bon train pour notre congrès national de 2025 qui aura lieu à Calgary. Je suis ravie de vous annoncer que ce sera l'un de nos rassemblements les plus interactifs et les plus tournés vers l'avenir. Avec le thème, « En selle pour demain », le programme de cette année est construit autour d'un leadership tourné vers l'avenir, les stratégies d'engagement, l'innovation technologique et la résilience du secteur. Attendez-vous à un mélange de conférenciers percutants, d'ateliers pratiques et de réseautage dynamique, tous destinés à vous aider à gérer le changement et à exploiter les opportunités au sein de votre propre organisation.

Mon premier anniversaire avec l'ACFE, en juillet prochain, me porte à réfléchir à ce nouveau voyage. Mon expérience dans le domaine de l'agriculture et du tourisme, axée sur le développement économique, m'a accordé une place de choix me permettant de constater l'impact des foires et des expositions, non seulement en tant qu'événements mais aussi en tant que moteurs de vitalité rurale, de connexion culturelle et de fierté communautaire. C'est une source d'inspiration de voir à quel point ce travail est profondément enraciné dans la vie des gens et à quel point il existe un potentiel pour avancer. C'est un honneur de soutenir un secteur qui continue d'évoluer tout en restant fidèle à ses racines.

Ici à l'ACFE, on vous voit. Nous notons les longues heures, la résolution créative des problèmes et le travail émotionnel de gestion d'espaces qui compte non seulement sur le plan économique, mais aussi sur le plan social et culturel. Alors que la saison démarre, engagez-vous auprès de votre communauté d'ACFE pour trouver inspiration, soutien et connexion. Ensemble, nous façonnons un avenir de foires dynamiques, inclusives et fermement ancrées dans l'héritage et l'innovation.

Je vous souhaite à tous, une saison de foire dynamique, animée et réussie.

“L'avenir appartient à ceux qui donnent à la prochaine génération des raisons d'espérer” – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Linda Sicoli

Directrice Exécutive



Angela Hogeveen

Age: 39

Norfolk County Agricultural Society

Angela Hogeveen brings a great blend of corporate event leadership and community-rooted vision to her role as General Manager of the Norfolk County Agricultural Society (NCAS). A native of Norfolk County, she built her professional foundation in motorsports, serving as Director of Marketing and Communications at Green Savoree Racing Promotions. There, she executed marquee events including the Honda Indy Toronto and Firestone Grand Prix of St. Petersburg, developing deep expertise in logistics, sponsorships, and public engagement.

In 2022, Angela returned to her hometown to take on the role of General Manager at NCAS, a nonprofit with over 185 years of agricultural tradition. Her leadership has emphasized year-round community engagement, strategic growth, and a renewed focus on agricultural education and outreach. Under her guidance, the Fairgrounds have become increasingly active throughout the year, with expanded programming, stronger partnerships, and a modern approach to connecting with the public.

Under Angela's direction, NCAS has earned multiple accolades, including Best New Festival and Best Social Media Campaign at the 2025 Festivals and Events Ontario (FEO) Awards. She also helped position NCAS as a key contributor to the AMPLIFY Norfolk initiative, which earned the 2024 Ontario Tourism Award of Excellence. Angela's innovative leadership, combined with her respect for heritage, has redefined what a modern agricultural society can be inclusive, dynamic, and deeply rooted in the community.

“Angela's leadership exemplifies her ability to keep heritage at the heart of progress”





Dalton Barteaux

Age: 17

Annapolis Valley Exhibition

Dalton Barteaux has been an integral part of the Annapolis Valley Exhibition since childhood, beginning as a 4-H volunteer and growing into a respected organizer and employee. His early contributions were rooted in hands-on assistance in both the main and pulling rings, quickly earning community recognition for his commitment and work ethic. Dalton's dedication has only deepened over time.

He continues to be a reliable presence, always willing to step in whenever needed, even during life transitions such as post-secondary education. His influence goes beyond his local fair in Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia, as he has also participated in exhibitions across the province, bringing back valuable insights and ideas. Dalton's passion for excellence and consistency in execution ensures every event he supports maintains the highest standards.

“Dalton’s passion for excellence and consistency in execution ensures every event he supports maintains the highest standards”



“He continues to be a reliable presence, always willing to step in whenever needed”



Eric Connell

Age: 32

Spencerville Agricultural Society

Eric Connell is a passionate agricultural advocate, volunteer, and community leader with deep roots in Eastern Ontario. Born on the very day of the Spencerville Fair in 1992, Eric's connection to this historic event began before he could walk—and he hasn't missed a single fair since. Raised on his family's 125-year-old dairy farm, Eric grew up immersed in rural life, developing a strong work ethic and a commitment to community service. He was his high school's valedictorian and volunteer award recipient before pursuing a career in television and media, which led to his current role as a Project Manager at Ross Video.

Eric has been a driving force behind the Spencerville Agricultural Society for over 15 years, becoming its first-ever male fair ambassador and later representing Spencerville at the CNE's Ambassador of the Fairs competition. Today, he serves as 1st Vice President and Marketing Director, where he leads a host of creative and impactful initiatives. During the pandemic, he orchestrated Spencerville Fair's first virtual and hybrid editions—keeping tradition alive in innovative ways. He also spearheaded a complete brand refresh, creating a new logo, launching a dynamic website, and expanding marketing efforts across TV, radio, social media, and even Highway 401 billboards.

“Eric's bond with the fair was written into his story from the very start”

Eric's contributions have garnered widespread recognition, including the 2024 Volunteer Accomplishment Award. He secured key sponsorships, launched novel fundraisers such as the Fair Vodka collaboration with local producers, and played a vital role in district-wide fair support and collaboration. His “if one of us wins, we all win” mindset fosters unity across Ontario's fair community.

As the Spencerville Fair prepares to celebrate its 170th anniversary in 2025, Eric is at the heart of its evolution, working tirelessly with fellow volunteers to deliver a celebration of tradition, innovation, and resilience including the return of the entertainment tent and the RCMP Musical Ride. With unmatched dedication and visionary leadership, Eric Connell is shaping the future of Canadian fairs while honoring their rich past.





Kalyn Van Horne

Age: 37

Explore Edmonton – KDays & Farmfair International

Kalyn Van Horne is an accomplished event producer and entertainment strategist with over 15 years of experience spanning the fair, sports, and entertainment sectors. She began her career in 2010 as Agriculture Coordinator at the Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) in Vancouver, where she played a central role in beloved programs like Farm Country, the 4-H Festival, and the Summer Night Concerts. Her work managing large-scale events continued through her role at the Oilers Entertainment Group in Edmonton, where she oversaw major concerts at Rogers Place—featuring icons like Elton John and Ariana Grande—and helped launch the fan-favourite Oilers Moss Pit during the 2022 NHL playoffs.

“Kalyn doesn’t just produce outstanding events—she is helping shape the future of fairs and exhibitions”

Since 2022, Kalyn has brought her exceptional operational and creative expertise to Explore Edmonton, first as Event Manager for Farmfair International and now as Manager of Entertainment and Attractions for KDays. At Farmfair, she orchestrated the globally renowned Supreme Show, managing every detail from scripting and lighting to securing \$110,000 in prizing. At KDays, she transformed the concert series into the rebranded KDays Music Fest and launched a second stage in partnership with local community groups in 2025, breathing new life into underused spaces.

Kalyn’s vision and leadership have been pivotal in redefining Alberta’s largest exhibitions. She is known for her skill in designing effective site layouts, ensuring cohesive entertainment programming, and mentoring rising industry professionals. Her inclusive and solutions-focused approach makes her a respected voice in the sector and a catalyst for meaningful change.

Rooted in her early experiences at the PNE, Kalyn continues to push the boundaries of what fairs and exhibitions can be—merging tradition with innovation to create unforgettable, community-focused events that engage and inspire. Her work is not only elevating the standards of today’s entertainment experiences but also shaping the next generation of Canadian fair leaders.

“Kalyn Van Horne has transformed every event she touches—blending strategic vision, operational excellence, and a deep love for entertainment”



“Her inclusive and solutions-focused approach makes her a respected voice in the sector and a catalyst for meaningful change”



Leigha Beckwith

Age: 33

The New Brunswick Provincial Exhibition

Leigha Beckwith is a dedicated agricultural leader and advocate for sustainable farming practices, based in Kingsley, New Brunswick. She grew up just outside Fredericton on her family's Belgian Draft Horse breeding farm, known as Farlane, which has earned acclaim across North America for producing top-quality Belgian halter horses. Inspired by her grandmother Lois's love for fairs and exhibitions, Leigha developed a deep connection to agricultural life early on.

As a teenager, she broadened her show ring experience by traveling throughout the Maritimes with Price Clydesdales, forging connections and gaining insight into fairs and exhibitions beyond her home province.

“Leigha developed a deep connection to agricultural life early on”

Leigha studied at Dalhousie University's Faculty of Agriculture, where she earned a Bachelor of Science with a double major in Animal and Plant Science. At DAL AC, she served as co-chair of College Royal, one of the university's most beloved events, for three years. The hands-on showcase teaches students about animal care and exhibition, and Leigha's leadership earned her a DAL Impact Award nomination.

Now living on the family farm with her husband Rob and their two daughters, Stevie and Parker, Leigha continues to care for 17 Belgian Draft Horses and a miniature horse named Juicy. The family grows their own hay and tends to a large garden and pumpkin patch.

Professionally, Leigha works full-time as a Regional Crop and Livestock Development Officer with the New Brunswick Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture & Fisheries, offering technical support, funding guidance, and field day coordination to producers in the region.

In her spare time, she remains immersed in the agricultural world, attending fairs and concerts with her family and actively engaging in numerous leadership roles. Leigha is a board member of the New Brunswick Provincial Exhibition (NBEX), President of the New Brunswick Institute of Agrologists, Maritime representative for the Canadian Belgian Horse Association, and an active member of the New Brunswick Draft Horse Association.

At NBEX, Leigha has taken on one of the most challenging leadership roles, chairing the province's largest and oldest exhibition. As Chair of the Provincial Exhibition subcommittee, she oversees an event that spans seven days, includes live performances from across North America, and awards excellence in cattle, beef, and other agricultural competitions. The planning process begins as soon as the current exhibition ends and involves over 100 staff and volunteers. Her tireless work ethic and passion for agriculture make her an invaluable asset to the fair and the broader New Brunswick farming community.





Melissa Player

Age: 32

Stanley Fair and the New Brunswick Fairs and Exhibition Association

Melissa Player's lifelong involvement in fairs began with her family's draft horse exhibits at the Queens County Fair. From 4-H and dairy showmanship to organizing logistics with her grandfather, Melissa's passion has grown into a full-fledged leadership career.

She officially joined the QCF committee in 2015 and spearheaded initiatives like the Sponsorship/Advertising Committee, Annual Volunteer Work Day, and a Friday night music show. In 2024, she became QCF's first female Vice President and later brought her expertise to the Stanley Fair.

As Vice President of the New Brunswick Provincial Association since 2022, Melissa has played a pivotal role in lobbying for increased government support and uniting fair members across the province. Her leadership blends tradition, innovation, and unwavering commitment to the success and sustainability of agricultural exhibitions.

“Her leadership blends tradition, innovation, and unwavering commitment to the success and sustainability of agricultural exhibition”





Phillip Davis

Age: 32

Davis Concessions Inc.

Phillip Davis is a first-generation concessionaire and co-owner of Davis Concessions Inc., which serves over 100,000 guests annually across Canada. Since founding the business in 2016, he has expanded from a single concession to six, introducing creative food items like Fried Canadian Cheese Curds, Vegetarian Corn Dogs, and Pickle-Fries.

Phillip is known for pioneering new culinary trends at fairs, earning “Best New Food” awards at Edmonton’s KDays two years in a row. He and his wife Jessie travel coast-to-coast with their newborn son, hiring Canadian youth and sourcing locally to support each community they serve.

In 2024, Phillip spoke at CAFE’s convention on industry partnerships, reflecting his drive to innovate and advocate for growth in the Canadian fairs sector. His energy, creativity, and grassroots approach make him a leading force in the industry’s next generation.

“Since founding the business in 2016, he has expanded from a single concession to six”

“His energy, creativity, and grassroots approach make him a leading force in the industry’s next generation”





Shayla Flanagan

Age: 33

Westerner Park Exposition

“Shayla is the engine that drives Westerner Days—from the post-event briefing to the opening of the gates”

Shayla Flanagan is a seasoned event professional and community-focused leader, currently serving as Fair Manager at Westerner Park in Red Deer, Alberta. A 2012 graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in International Hotel Management, Shayla launched her career with an internship at Walt Disney World. That formative experience, working at the prestigious Yacht & Beach Club Resort, instilled in her a deep appreciation for exceptional guest service and the intricate logistics behind large-scale event operations.

Since joining Westerner Park in 2015, Shayla has grown into a pivotal role within the organization. What began with coordinating the indoor vendor market soon expanded to include oversight of the food truck area, entertainment programming, and internal communications.

Over the years, her attention to detail, creativity, and organizational skills naturally positioned her as a key planner of Westerner Days, one of Alberta's most anticipated fairs.

In 2025, Shayla took on her most comprehensive role yet, leading the planning and execution of Westerner Days. She now manages over 30 stage performances, curates entertainment acts ranging from children's shows to lounge performers, oversees the annual Westerner Days Parade, liaises with the RCMP Musical Ride, and ensures the success of both indoor and outdoor vendor experiences.

One of Shayla's most meaningful contributions is the revival of “Share the Fair”, a heartfelt initiative that brings Westerner Days entertainers to the Ronald McDonald House and welcomes children from the pediatric unit of the local hospital to experience the magic of the fair. This program exemplifies her passion for inclusive, community-centered events and her ability to use entertainment as a force for good.

Shayla continues to be the engine behind Westerner Days, combining operational excellence with a genuine love for her community. Her leadership, dedication, and joy-driven approach make her an inspiring figure in the Canadian fairs and exhibitions industry.





Shaylene Kirton

Age: 29

Event Staff Canada / AuthentiGATE

Shaylene Kirton has grown up with AuthentiGATE, working her way from part-time high school roles to her current position as Client Care Manager. Based in Manitoba, Shaylene leads the online design team and supports the setup of online sales systems for events across North America.

“She is always bringing her upbeat personality and expertise”

She has supported major events like the CNE, Queen City Ex, and the Mississippi State Fair, always bringing her upbeat personality and expertise. Shaylene’s customer-first attitude and problem-solving skills make her a trusted partner for clients and a valued team member.

Known for her love of quirky animals and exotic food finds, Shay shares her life with husband Taylor and their dog Kamari. Her dedication and leadership exemplify the spirit of emerging industry professionals shaping the future of fair admissions and digital engagement.

“Shaylene’s customer-first attitude and problem-solving skills make her a trusted partner for clients and a valued team member”





Sydney Adams

Age: 26

Paris Agricultural Society

Sydney Adams is a compassionate and community-driven leader who blends heart, strategy, and hands-on dedication in all she does. As a Grief and Bereavement Counsellor at Stedman Community Hospice, Sydney provides support to individuals and families during some of life's most difficult moments—bringing a calm presence, deep empathy, and unwavering support to those in need. These same qualities carry over to her longstanding commitment to the Paris Agricultural Society, where she has volunteered for more than 15 years.

A director for five years and now an executive member, Sydney currently chairs the gates committee, overseeing fair entry operations with professionalism, efficiency, and kindness. Her supportive leadership empowers volunteers and ensures a positive experience for fairgoers and team members alike. Sydney consistently leads by example, demonstrating a strong work ethic, clear communication, and an exceptional ability to bring people together.

Beyond operations, Sydney has played a key strategic role in guiding the Society through a pivotal governance transition. She spearheaded the review and revision of the organization's constitution to ensure compliance with Ontario's Not-for-Profit Corporations Act (ONCA), balancing legal alignment with the preservation of the Society's mission and values. Her attention to detail and collaborative approach were instrumental in this successful update, providing long-term stability and accountability.

With a unique combination of operational leadership, emotional intelligence, and strategic foresight, Sydney Adams exemplifies the next generation of fair leaders. She brings a powerful blend of compassion and capability to every role she takes on—making her a truly deserving honouree of the 2025 CAFE Top 10 Under 40.

“With a unique combination of operational leadership, emotional intelligence, and strategic foresight, Sydney Adams exemplifies the next generation of fair leaders”



Hants County Exhibition:

Honouring the Past, Embracing the Future

By: Sheri Donovan

North America's Oldest Fair: A Legacy Since 1765

Established in 1765, the Hants County Exhibition holds the distinguished title of being the oldest continuously running agricultural fair in North America. Deeply rooted in agricultural tradition, the Exhibition continues to evolve each year, blending time-honoured customs with contemporary attractions to stay relevant, educational, and entertaining for a diverse and growing audience.

The very first fair took place on May 21, 1765, at Fort Edward in Windsor, Nova Scotia, drawing approximately 100 farmers who proudly showcased their best livestock, horses, cattle, oxen, hogs, and sheep, as well as grains and homemade foodstuffs. Today, the spirit of that inaugural event lives on, even as the fair welcomes new cultural influences and a broader demographic. With an influx of new Canadians and inter-provincial migration, the Exhibition has transformed into a vibrant, multicultural celebration.



Honouring the Past, Embracing the New.

This evolving identity is an opportunity, not just to educate newcomers on the fair's rich history, but also to celebrate new customs and traditions. The result is a stronger connection to the region's cultural and economic significance, helping to attract people to the community and foster long-term ties. While modernization is essential, the challenge remains: how to innovate without losing sight of what makes the fair special.

The traditional exhibits that defined the fair in 1765 still stand at its core, and preserving that legacy is crucial.

A Home for Rural Life and Community

In 1949, the fairgrounds relocated to their current home on Wentworth Road, and the Windsor Agricultural Society, owner and operator of the fairgrounds, was formally incorporated.

Since then, the Society has been dedicated to providing a dynamic, inclusive space for the community to gather, celebrate rural life, and strengthen the bond between people, agriculture, and the land.

Bridging Town and Country

Each year, the Exhibition brings together farmers, artisans, families, and the general public, creating a shared sense of identity that unites rural and urban populations. Key goals of the event include showcasing animal husbandry, hosting thrilling competitions, celebrating youth, and bridging the urban-rural divide. By educating visitors about the origins of their food, the challenges faced by farmers, and innovations in sustainable agriculture, the Exhibition reinforces the critical role of farming in modern society.



Weathering the Storms: Challenges of Tradition

Of course, with tradition comes its own set of challenges. The fair's annual dates land squarely in the middle of hurricane season, though organizers prefer not to say the "H" word! This makes planning unpredictable and often stressful. Another major hurdle is the aging infrastructure, which requires continual upgrades.



These improvements are vital not only for the Exhibition itself, but also for community groups who depend on the facilities year-round. While progress is steady thanks to strong stakeholder relationships and government support, it can feel like a never-ending cycle, as one area is restored, another shows its age.

Still, the resilience of the Hants County Exhibition cannot be overstated. The upcoming 260th anniversary in 2025 is a testament to its enduring importance and the unwavering commitment of the community.

Innovative initiatives such as Future Farmers Friday, which introduces primary students to agriculture, and an annual scholarship for post-secondary agricultural students highlight the Exhibition's investment in the future of farming.

A Living Bridge Between Generations

Looking ahead, the Windsor Agricultural Society is committed to engaging community leaders, stakeholders, staff, and volunteers in ongoing conversations about relevance, sustainability, and growth. Agrotourism, modern attractions, and community-centric programs remain priorities. The Society's Board of Directors, made up of dedicated generational members, plays a crucial role in ensuring the fair's legacy continues.

Thanks to government funding, community engagement, loyal sponsors, and a willingness to evolve, the Hants County Exhibition is poised to remain a pillar of the region for generations to come, a living bridge between past, present, and future.

“Today, the spirit of that inaugural event lives on, even as the fair welcomes new cultural influences and a broader demographic”

Tradition, Innovation, and Community Pride: The Norfolk County Fair Model

By Angela Hogeveen



A Living Legacy: 180 Years of Tradition

With over 180 years of history, the Norfolk County Fair & Horse Show is more than just an annual event, it is a living tradition, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the region. Operated by the Norfolk County Agricultural Society (NCAS), the fair stands as a shining example of how to evolve with a growing community while preserving the agricultural legacy that has long defined rural Ontario.

Each fall, for one vibrant week, the fairgrounds are transformed into a dynamic celebration of everything that makes Norfolk unique. It's a place where rural traditions meet high-energy entertainment, and where generations come together to create lasting memories.

Big Shows, Small-Town Magic

From the roar of monster trucks and the thrills of FMX stunt shows, to the excitement of tractor pulls and the energy of concerts by national headliners, the fair's entertainment programming is unmatched in rural Ontario. Events such as Young Canada Day, a spirited celebration of local schools—and five action-packed nights of motorsports and music draw visitors from across the province and beyond.

Despite the growth and spectacle, the fair remains true to its roots. Beloved agricultural staples such as crop, livestock, and homecraft competitions remain at the heart of the event.

The prestigious Horse Show continues to attract hundreds of competitors from Canada and the United States, showcasing not only skill and dedication but also the deep sense of rural pride that defines the community.

A Fair for All

With a full midway, over 200 vendors, live local music, and fan-favourite acts like the SuperDogs, the fair truly offers something for everyone while upholding its mission to celebrate and sustain rural life.

The NCAS is much more than a one-week-a-year organization. As stewards of both rural culture and community infrastructure, they ensure that the fairgrounds serve as a vital year-round gathering place. Weekly farmers markets, local curling club support, and rental of the fairgrounds for private and community events all contribute to the organization's ongoing impact.

The economic contribution is significant. The fair generates an estimated \$45 million in annual economic impact, drawing more than 250,000 visitors each year. It also provides a vital platform for farmers, artisans, brewers, and vintners to share their stories, products, and heritage with a broader audience.

Growing Future Farmers and Leaders

Understanding that the future of rural traditions lies in the hands of youth, NCAS invests heavily in educational and leadership programming. From school visits and Junior Fair contests to initiatives like Grade 4 Ag Awareness, Read Your Way to the Fair, and Passport to Agriculture, these programs aim to help young people see themselves as part of the larger agricultural story.

Close collaboration with local 4-H clubs furthers this mission by providing young participants with hands-on experiences that develop both technical skills and core values like responsibility, collaboration, and community pride.



Meeting Modern Challenges with Innovation

Like many heritage organizations, NCAS faces modern challenges: rising costs, aging infrastructure, and changes in volunteerism. But through strategic planning and a willingness to evolve, they have found creative solutions.

By expanding programming to include year-round events, like evening craft markets, concerts, and seasonal family festivals, the fair has diversified its audience and revenue streams. This helps reduce the risks associated with relying on a single annual event while keeping the community engaged throughout the year.

Art, Identity, and Community Pride

One standout initiative is the 2024 mural project, created in partnership with Nova Mutual Insurance. Covering 3,720 square feet, the mural stands as a bold visual tribute to Norfolk's agricultural history and the power of local collaboration. It has quickly become a campus landmark and a symbol of shared community pride.



Tradition Meets Transformation

As Norfolk's demographics shift and the community becomes more diverse, NCAS has adapted. Its programming now reflects a broader range of cultures, interests, and lifestyles, ensuring that both longtime residents and newcomers feel welcome. Investments in technology have modernized ticketing, marketing, and daily operations, allowing the organization to remain agile and efficient.

Looking ahead, the Norfolk County Fairgrounds is poised to become the region's premier entertainment destination. Planned upgrades will focus on modernizing amenities, increasing accessibility, and embracing sustainable practices. With a renewed focus on sponsorship development and green initiatives, NCAS is preparing not just for its next fair, but for the next century of community impact.

Family & Community

So what defines success for the Norfolk County Fair? It's not just about ticket sales or visitor counts. It's about a family sharing their best day out, a young artist proudly displaying their ribbon, and multi-generational memories made under the fair lights. For NCAS, success is defined by connection, pride, and legacy.

Their message is clear and powerful: Stay connected to your community. Be willing to evolve. Respect your roots, but don't be afraid to grow new branches. The most successful fairs, like Norfolk's, preserve tradition while embracing innovation, ensuring that the spirit of rural life continues to thrive for generations to come.





The Canadian Finals Rodeo

A Return to Edmonton with Unmatched Energy and Impact

By: Amanda Frigon

A Golden Anniversary for Canada's Premier Rodeo

The Canadian Finals Rodeo (CFR), Canada's most prestigious rodeo championship, returned to Edmonton in 2024 for its 50th anniversary, bringing a renewed sense of excitement, community pride, and economic impact. A celebration of Western culture, athleticism, and community engagement, the CFR has reaffirmed its status as one of the most significant sporting and cultural events in the country. Originally launched in 1974 at the Edmonton Gardens, the CFR quickly became a beloved local tradition, filling over 15,000 seats at the Northlands Coliseum for decades.

After a brief relocation to Red Deer, the championship returned triumphantly to the downtown Rogers Place arena in Edmonton, where the 2024 edition marked a new chapter. With a capacity of over 18,000 and proximity to the vibrant ICE District, Rogers Place offered a world-class spectator experience.

World-Class Competition on a Global Stage

The CFR draws elite competitors from Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Brazil, and Australia and is known for its high stakes: over \$1.6 million in prize money and intense performances.



Five main rodeo shows were held over four days, accompanied by dozens of auxiliary events throughout the city. The caliber of the competition reached new heights in 2024, fueled by increased prize purses and the historic and inspiring milestone of including women's breakaway roping in every performance.

Economic Powerhouse and Tourism Booster

The Canadian Finals Rodeo is more than just a competition; it's also a powerful economic engine and cultural catalyst. The 2024 event generated over \$32 million in economic activity and created more than 5,500 jobs. With over 42,000 attendees, 56% of whom were from outside Edmonton and 7% of whom were from outside Alberta, the CFR boosted tourism and brought business to local hotels, restaurants, and shops. Visitors stayed an average of three nights, booking over 14,000 hotel room nights.

The Canadian Country Expo Experience

An integral part of the CFR experience is the Canadian Country Expo (CCE), a six-day Western-themed trade show and celebration of rural culture hosted at the Edmonton EXPO Centre. Spanning over 200,000 square feet, the CCE featured vendor exhibits, educational workshops, and major rodeo events, including the Canadian Youth Rodeo Championship, High Roller Barrel Racing, and Team Roping competitions. Families enjoyed interactive spaces such as the Kids Zone and petting zoo, making the event inclusive for all.

Connecting Communities, Honouring Traditions

At its core, the CFR champions community connection, particularly with rural and agricultural groups. The event highlights traditions and skills while promoting the next generation through educational and youth-oriented activities. Through collaborations with schools, clubs, and agricultural organizations, Edmonton's reputation as a rodeo hub is further solidified.

However, executing the event is not without its challenges. In 2024, for example, the CFR faced the daunting task of converting Rogers Place from a hockey arena to a rodeo venue in less than 24 hours due to overlapping NHL preseason games. The success of this transformation is a testament to careful planning and collaboration with venue teams and contractors.

Ethics, Safety, and Volunteer Power

Animal welfare is a cornerstone of CFR operations. A full-time veterinarian inspects all animals daily, and judges strictly enforce CPRA rules regarding humane treatment. Animals deemed unfit to perform are removed from competition, and rodeo stock contractors prioritize the health and care of their animals. Footing specialists ensure optimal arena conditions to prevent injuries, and professional rodeo sports medicine teams are on site to treat human athletes.

Volunteers also play a vital role in our events. Explore Edmonton mobilizes over 600 volunteers annually, who contribute approximately 12,000 hours over the course of the year with 1,500 hours during CFR week alone. These individuals handle tasks ranging from behind-the-scenes tours and logistics, to front of house programming. Participating as volunteers, they are fostering a deep sense of ownership and pride in our events.

Partnerships, Recognition, and the Road Ahead

A key to the CFR's success is its strong public-private partnerships. The Government of Alberta committed \$4.5 million over three years, recognizing the event's importance to economic development and cultural heritage. Sponsors like ATB Financial, along with the City of Edmonton and the local hospitality sector, have joined forces to ensure the CFR continues to thrive and evolve.

Following on the success of the 2024 event, the CFR was a finalist for the Sport Tourism Canada Prestige Awards, as the Canadian Sport Event of the Year. The event also just recently won the Destination Event of the Year Award at the Edmonton Tourism Awards.

Looking ahead, the goal is to maintain the CFR's momentum and grow its national and international profile. With a focus on improving the visitor experience, increasing tourism year over year, and reinvesting in the event and its athletes, the CFR is poised to remain a cornerstone of Canadian Western heritage for decades to come.

The CFR is more than a rodeo; it's a celebration of identity, a showcase of world-class talent, and a driver of economic and cultural vitality. As Edmonton embraces this Western icon, the city reaffirms its place on the global rodeo map.



“The CFR is more than a rodeo; it’s a celebration of identity, a showcase of world-class talent, and a driver of economic and cultural vitality”



SERVICE MEMBER SPOTLIGHT:



Marchant Concessions – A Family Legacy of Flavour and Community

By Cheyenne Marchant

The Birth of a Family Legacy

In 1995, what began as a simple request from a local event in Summerland, BC, would become a defining moment for the Marchant family. Owners of a successful café at the time, Tod and Dianna Marchant were asked to serve coffee in the park. With borrowed equipment and a repurposed hot dog trailer, they set up shop—and in doing so, discovered a whole new path forward.

A Family in Motion

That single event marked the start of Marchant Concessions, a family-run mobile food service company that now includes multiple trailers offering coffee, slush beverages, and soft serve ice cream at fairs and festivals across the country.

The Marchants quickly saw the appeal: bringing their product directly to the people created joy, engagement, and opportunity in a way brick-and-mortar service simply couldn't match. The company, now a full-fledged family enterprise, includes the next generation—children Cheyenne and Cole, along with their spouses. Each family member brings unique skills to the table, forming a well-rounded team that continues to strengthen the business with every season. Over the years, they've also built a dedicated team of staff, many of whom are family or long-standing seasonal employees.

Year-Round Dedication

Preparation is a year-round affair for Marchant Concessions. Planning for the next season begins even before the current one ends, with meticulous lists, maintenance schedules, and improvements brainstormed while the team is still in the thick of fair season.

The off-season sees these ideas implemented, equipment inspected, insurance renewed, and new staff brought on board—many of them students for whom Marchant Concessions provides a valuable first job experience.

Food, Fun, and First Impressions

Attending many of the same events annually, the company has built long-standing relationships with fairs and exhibitions across Canada.

Their route is the result of years of networking, trust-building, and proven reliability. And while the events may be familiar, the offerings are always evolving. Each year, the Marchants seek new ways to improve operations, streamline logistics, and introduce fresh menu items that are not only Instagram-worthy, but genuinely delicious.

Designed for Delight

Indeed, the Marchants understand that today's fairgoers "eat with their eyes first." In the age of social media, presentation is paramount.

Eye-catching visuals, vibrant signage, and crowd-pleasing flavours are key. Among the fan favourites? Their expansive "Slush Zones" of icy beverages on hot summer days, and the ever-popular Pineapple Whip served from their Summerland Soft Serves trailer.

But success in this industry isn't just about the food. It's also about the experience. The Marchants believe the service element is just as important as the product itself. A warm smile and an engaging attitude from staff can elevate a transaction into a memorable moment.

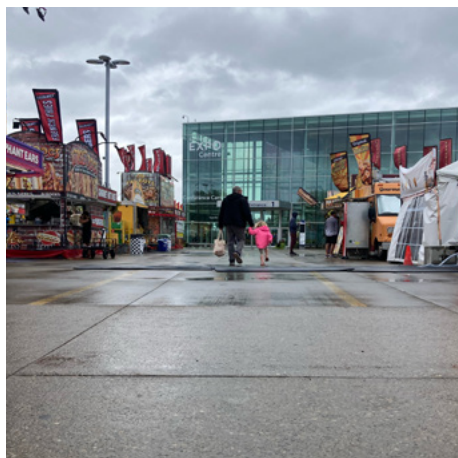
Resilience and Roots

Like many in the fair and exhibition sector, Marchant Concessions has faced its share of challenges—from staffing shortages to rising costs and supply chain issues. Yet through it all, they've remained resilient. Years of refining logistics, adapting to changes, and sharing knowledge with emerging vendors have cemented their reputation as both leaders and mentors in the industry.

Perhaps most inspiring is their commitment to community. Working at fairs and festivals has given the Marchants a unique window into the heart of Canada's towns and cities. They've witnessed the spirit of collaboration that brings these events to life and cherish their role in contributing to those collective experiences.

Sweet Traditions, Shared Across Generations

As a third generation begins to grow up around the family business, there's hope that Marchant Concessions will remain a beloved fixture of the fair circuit for years to come. With tradition, creativity, and community at their core, the future looks as bright—and as sweet—as a freshly served ice cream on a summer day.



Transform Your Fair's Marketing and Operations: How AI Can Revolutionize Your Community Event

By: Doug van Wolde

Your agricultural fair has weathered decades of change, from handwritten ledgers to digital ticketing systems. Yet today, you face a challenge that feels different: how do you connect with modern audiences while preserving the authentic community spirit that makes your fair special? How do you compete for attention in an increasingly digital world without losing your agricultural roots?

The answer lies in artificial intelligence, not as a replacement for your community knowledge but as a powerful ally in your mission to serve visitors better.

The Challenge Every Fair Organizer Faces

You know your community inside and out. You understand what draws families to your grounds year after year and recognize the delicate balance between honouring tradition and embracing innovation. But you also face mounting pressures such as decreasing volunteer availability, increased competition for entertainment dollars, and the constant need to reach new audiences while serving longtime supporters.

You may have heard the AI buzz and wondered if it's right for your fair. Maybe you've attempted to use AI tools only to receive generic, corporate sounding content that couldn't be further from your community's voice. Or you might be hesitating entirely, unsure where to begin or concerned about producing content that feels artificial. You're not alone in this struggle. Fair organizers across Canada grapple with the same questions: How can technology enhance rather than diminish the personal connections that make our events meaningful?

What Happens When You Don't Act

Without effective digital marketing strategies, your fair risks becoming invisible to potential new visitors while failing to engage existing supporters effectively. Generic marketing materials fail to capture your community's unique character, leading to reduced attendance and volunteer engagement. Meanwhile, administrative tasks continue consuming precious time that could be spent on programming and community building.

The cost of inaction compounds over time: missed opportunities to connect with young families, difficulty attracting new vendors and sponsors, and the gradual erosion of your fair's visibility in an increasingly competitive entertainment landscape.

Your Path to AI-Enhanced Fair Management

Here's the encouraging truth: artificial intelligence can become your most valuable assistant in creating marketing that resonates, operations that flow smoothly, and experiences that delight visitors, all while preserving the authentic community spirit you've worked decades to build. Understanding how AI actually works removes much of the mystery and fear surrounding these tools. AI doesn't think or create from scratch. Instead, it analyzes vast amounts of existing content from documents, encyclopedias, websites, and published materials to identify patterns and generate responses that appear new to us. Think of it as an incredibly well-read assistant that can quickly synthesize information from thousands of sources but one that needs your direction to produce anything meaningful. This foundation in existing knowledge becomes your advantage when you provide AI with your unique community insights, local expertise, and deep understanding of what makes your fair special. The output only looks new because AI recombines existing information in ways tailored to your specific prompts and requirements.

Start Where You Are

Begin with a single, manageable project. Choose something specific, perhaps rewriting your vendor information packet or creating social media posts for an upcoming entertainment announcement. Use tools like ChatGPT or Claude.ai, but approach them as collaborative partners rather than magic solutions.

Provide Rich Context

The difference between generic AI output and compelling community-focused content lies in your input. When creating event announcements, share details about your local area, seasonal traditions, and the specific language your community uses. Instead of asking for "a fair announcement," request "a family-friendly announcement for our fall harvest celebration that speaks to multi-generational farming families in rural Ontario."

Develop Your Visual Strategy

Move beyond stock photography by creating detailed prompts for authentic imagery. Specify natural lighting, represent your community's diversity, and request candid moments that reflect real fair experiences—families enjoying midway rides, seniors sharing stories at craft demonstrations, children meeting farm animals for the first time.

Optimize for Discovery

Use AI to help incorporate location-specific keywords naturally throughout your content. Whether you're promoting events in Beeton, Caledon, or New Tecumseth, AI can help weave regional references into compelling copy that search engines notice and locals recognize as authentically theirs.

Streamline Your Operations

Beyond marketing, AI excels at administrative tasks. Use it to draft standard operating procedures, create documentation for volunteer training, or develop templates for sponsor communications. The time you save on routine tasks returns to you as an opportunity for personal community engagement.

The Tools That Make It Possible

Your AI toolkit doesn't need to be complex. ChatGPT and Claude.ai provide excellent starting points for content creation and administrative support. Tools like Merlin, Google AI Studio, and Grok offer additional capabilities as your confidence grows. The key is choosing platforms that feel comfortable and starting with simple, low-risk projects.

Remember: you control the quality of AI output through the quality of your input. Detailed prompts that include your fair's personality, community context, and specific goals produce dramatically better results than generic requests.

Success Requires Human Wisdom

Throughout this process, never abandon your most valuable asset: human judgment. Every piece of AI-generated content should be reviewed by people who understand your community. Seek feedback from board members, volunteers, and longtime fair supporters.

The goal isn't to eliminate human involvement but to amplify your team's effectiveness. When colleagues at other fairs have struggled with AI-generated marketing materials, the problem invariably traces back to insufficient prompting and lack of original input. Quality AI assistance requires the same thoughtful effort you'd invest in any important project.

Your Fair's AI-Enhanced Future

Imagine creating compelling event announcements in minutes rather than hours, developing social media content that consistently reflects your community's voice, and generating professional marketing materials without losing the personal touch that makes your fair special.

Picture streamlined vendor communications, consistent messaging across all platforms, and administrative efficiency that frees your volunteers to focus on what they do best: building community connections. This isn't a distant possibility—it's achievable today with deliberate, thoughtful AI implementation. Fair organizers who embrace AI as a collaborative tool report more effective marketing, smoother operations, and enhanced ability to serve their communities. They're not replacing the personal relationships that drive successful fairs; they're creating more time and energy to nurture those connections.

Take Your First Step

The path forward isn't about becoming an AI expert overnight—it's about taking one meaningful action that moves your fair closer to more effective community engagement. Pick a specific challenge you're facing right now: maybe you need fresh content for your website, or perhaps you're struggling to write compelling sponsor thank-you letters that don't sound generic.

The magic behind your Fair

Build your confidence through small victories. When you successfully use AI to solve that first problem, you'll develop the judgment needed to tackle bigger challenges. Each success teaches you more about crafting effective prompts and recognizing quality output.

Your agricultural fair represents something irreplaceable in your community—a place where neighbours become friends, traditions pass between generations, and local agriculture connects with urban families. AI can't replicate this magic, but it can help you communicate it more effectively. The most successful fair organizers in the coming years won't be those who resist change or those who abandon their community focus for technology. They'll be the ones who thoughtfully integrate AI capabilities with their deep understanding of local needs, creating more impactful marketing and smoother operations while staying true to their agricultural roots.

Your community is counting on your fair to continue serving as a gathering place that celebrates rural life and brings people together. The question isn't whether technology will change how you operate—it's whether you'll guide that change in ways that strengthen your mission. Doug van Wolde has spent 35 years volunteering with agricultural fairs and is a web developer for multiple Ontario fair organizations, helping communities bridge traditional values with modern digital opportunities.

“Your fair represents something irreplaceable in your community. AI can't replicate this magic, but it can help you communicate it more effectively”



Behind the Spotlight: Coordinating Interactive Experiences at the CNE

By Krystyna Rodrigues, Canadian National Exhibition (CNE)

From Spark to Strategy: Where Ideas Begin

Bringing interactive programming to life at a major fair like the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) is a blend of creativity, precision, and collaborative problem-solving. As part of the Sports and Attractions Programs team, Krystyna Rodriguez has played a central role in delivering immersive, guest-focused activations that balance innovation with logistical feasibility.

Program development at the CNE often begins with inspiration, ideas sparked by everyday encounters, events, or even casual observations. These concepts are captured and revisited as potential new programs. While Rodriguez focuses on her department's scope, she often shares promising ideas across teams to support broader CNE initiatives.

Feasibility First: Turning Ideas into Action

When an idea appears viable, the next step is assessing logistics. This is a critical filter that determines whether a concept can move forward. Only once the program proves feasible from a safety and infrastructure standpoint does the team refine its theme and ensure alignment with CNE's core values and intended audience. This practical-first approach ensures creativity is grounded in operational reality.

Finding the Right Partners

Sourcing partners and vendors for activations is an ongoing, process. Rather than relying solely on directories or referrals, Rodriguez actively scouts for new experiences at conferences, trade shows, and community events. In fact, one of the CNE's Gaming Garage highlights, an interactive artificial intelligence activation, emerged from a connection she made at the 2023 CAFE convention.

Once a promising partner is identified, the coordination begins with a preliminary meeting. These early conversations are used to clarify roles, responsibilities, logistics, and support needs. The CNE often requests tiered quotes (low, mid, and high-range) to determine the best fit based on budget and expected outcomes.

This structure helps the programming team adapt and optimize activations within financial constraints.

Activations vs. Entertainment

Coordinating an activation differs meaningfully from traditional live entertainment. While both involve contracting and scheduling, activations often require more creative input and flexible planning. Working directly with program providers, rather than agents, streamlines the process and encourages collaboration. These projects also demand significant logistical planning, including space layouts, crowd flow, staffing, and sometimes even custom-built installations.

Innovation Under Pressure

One particularly challenging project was the 2023 relaunch of the Gaming Garage, which Rodriguez led with limited preparation time. Initially focused on replicating the previous year's model, she quickly shifted to a fresh approach that drew on her own event management background.

Her most notable innovation was the creation of Indie and Student Game Showcases, a project that transformed unused booth space into a platform for local developers and students to engage with fairgoers. The initiative has since become a highlight of the Gaming Garage and continues to grow.

Logistics that Make or Break the Experience

Logistical details are central to activation success. Clear, engaging signage is often underestimated, yet crucial in helping guests navigate experiences. Rodriguez emphasizes simplicity, using short text, icons, and strategic design to invite interaction and reduce confusion. Guest movement through activation zones is also carefully considered, with extra space allotted for queues and bystanders to ensure safety and enjoyment.

Managing multiple activations simultaneously requires structured coordination. The programming team relies on shared task-tracking tools and regular status updates to keep projects on schedule. Prompt follow-ups and firm deadlines ensure that partners deliver what's needed on time. Collaboration with other departments, especially marketing, operations, and safety, is critical. Each team brings its expertise to bear, creating a seamless final product that reflects shared goals.

Looking Ahead: Evolving with Engagement

Looking to the future, interactive elements will remain central to fair programming. Guests increasingly seek meaningful engagement, community connection, and personalized experiences. Unique, locally-inspired programs are gaining traction, as are experimental models like exchange-based games or community-generated content. As technology evolves, so too will opportunities for dynamic and immersive activations.

At the CNE, innovation is driven not just by novelty, but by thoughtful planning and an unwavering focus on guest experience. The work behind the scenes, including the creative, logistical, and collaborative efforts, is what ensures each activation delivers lasting impact on fairgoers and the broader community alike.

“CNE is a blend of creativity, precision, and collaborative problem-solving”

Community Building for Fairs PNE Model

By Shelley Frost

At the heart of every great fair is a commitment to more than just entertainment. For the Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) in Vancouver, community building is both a guiding principle and a strategic priority. With over a century of history, the PNE is redefining community and good citizenship by focusing on collaboration, inclusion, and the power of play. This approach has strengthened our organization and made it more responsive.

At the PNE, community building means creating opportunities for connection, participation, and input through events, activities, and access to natural spaces. It's about fostering a sense of belonging and shared ownership.

We create opportunities for engagement such as open houses, focus groups, and advisory boards. These initiatives, in conjunction with ongoing outreach and communication, support our commitment to listening and responding to our community stakeholders. Our efforts build mutual trust and strengthen ties with the Hastings-Sunrise neighbourhood we call home.



Programs like the Community Advisory Group (CAG) offer local stakeholders an opportunity to provide constructive input and feedback on events, community engagement, the Hastings Park/PNE Master Plan, and operations that affect the local community. Open houses and neighbourhood focus groups provide an opportunity for people to learn about what's happening around the site, offer direct feedback and engage in dialogue. We also support important community initiatives, such as the annual Terry Fox Run, which supports cancer research and community spirit; Community Day at Playland, which raises \$10,000 every year to provide grants to local groups through our Community Grant Fund; and free Community Skate Days through the winter for local residents. As we expand our outreach efforts, we are seeing a substantial increase in subscribers to the monthly community newsletter, the Community Grant Fund, and more engagement with our community in general.

In addition, thanks to the generosity of our partner, TD Bank, we're opening doors for at-risk and marginalized youth between the ages of 13 and 18 who reside in Vancouver. The program introduces young people to different career options in a fun, accessible, and hands-on setting with a focus on education. Participants get a behind-the-scenes look at our operations, including concert setup, animatronics, public safety, and event logistics. Launched in 2024, we're pleased to report that enrollment and completion of the six-week program doubled this year, highlighting the growing demand and meaningful impact it's having on youth in our community.



Balancing our operations with community expectations hasn't been without its obstacles. Some of the challenges we have addressed within the community include managing noise, traffic, waste, and the use of green spaces. Additionally, we are constantly improving how we incorporate many perspectives through dialogue and flexibility.

Over the years, we have learned to prioritize open collaboration and transparency. It's important to be proactive and to anticipate and prepare for any operational impacts. Also, engaging with community leaders and encouraging them to participate in and co-create events is key to the success of the events. Collaborating with the neighbourhood boosts community development by generating employment opportunities and supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs.

Looking ahead, we are building a new amphitheatre, the Freedom Mobile Arch, which will open in 2026 and provide space for community programming. We are also developing additional community grants, forming new partnerships with local organizations on education and youth initiatives, and building stronger relationships with First Nations.

Fairs like the PNE are increasingly recognized as drivers of local development. Through job creation, supporting local vendors, and offering accessible programming, they provide more than just a few days of rides and games. As our organization looks ahead, our commitment to the community remains as strong as ever.

Whether through the creation of inclusive spaces, investments in youth, or partnerships that reflect the diverse fabric of Vancouver, we're building more than events—we're building belonging.

Community building has become a natural part of how we operate. It's not just about big projects, it's about the small, consistent connections that add up over time. And as we grow, we'll keep showing up, staying connected, and finding ways to make a positive difference close to home.

“At the PNE, we’re building more than events—we’re building belonging, through consistent, meaningful connections that celebrate inclusion, empower youth, and strengthen the vibrant fabric of our community”





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Engaging the next generation of community builders

By Laura Neira Marciales

With the arrival of summer, the sun shines brighter and Canada opens its doors to hundreds of fairs and exhibitions that celebrate agriculture, heritage, innovation, and local talent. These events also offer a valuable opportunity to inspire younger generations to fall in love with these traditions, and to keep them alive by contributing their time, energy, and passion.

Although recruiting and retaining volunteers isn't as simple as it used to be, fair organizers face a growing challenge: how to engage the next generation of supporters. In fact, the percentage of Canadians volunteering for nonprofits and charities dropped significantly, from 41% in 2018 to just 32% in 2023, according to preliminary findings from Statistics Canada's 2023 Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating. The good news? With the right approach, there's still a powerful opportunity to build stronger, more diverse, and more engaged volunteer teams than ever before.

1- Make it personal

People volunteer when they feel connected to the cause, and how you talk to them is really important. Use storytelling, videos, social media posts, or short interviews, where you can showcase the real impact of volunteering with you. Who and how would they help? Highlight how their contribution helps keep traditions alive, supports youth in agriculture, or brings joy to families.

2- Use the right channels

Look for allies and the right channels to reach younger and more diverse audiences. There are huge national platforms like Volunteer Canada, CharityVillage, or VolunteerConnector that can help you. You can also contact the guidance department at local schools, visit universities, and post on community bulletin boards. Don't forget the social media ads and local influencers to broaden your reach.

3- Keep it simple

Create easy sign-ups and registration processes. Young people access everything through their phones, so make sure your forms are mobile-friendly. Be clear and concise, determine clear outline roles, time commitments, and expectations. Offer flexible volunteer opportunities, a mix between short-term and long-term programs, and have a volunteer coordinator on site to help direct volunteers.

4- Recognize their work

Volunteers may not expect payment, but appreciation goes a long way. You can consider offering some free admission, food or drink vouchers, and merchandise. You can also give them certificates or letters of recommendation upon completion of the programs. And why not? Organize some volunteer appreciation events or spotlight features on your website and social media.

5- Make them part of the team

Volunteers are as important as employees, and having a clear onboarding and training helps them not only understand the organization more, but also their part in it. Create a relationship between the new and the old volunteers with a buddy system.

6- Reach a diverse audience

Fairs reflect communities, and so should volunteer teams. Engage newcomers looking to build connections, retirees eager to stay active, and parents and families who want to volunteer together.

Also engage young professionals seeking networking and leadership opportunities and kids who want to start giving back to their communities while having fun.



2025 CAFE Convention

November 19–21, 2025
Calgary, Alberta

Each year, the CAFE Convention brings together fair and exhibition professionals from across the country to connect, collaborate, and celebrate the spirit of Canadian fairs. In 2025, we're heading to the heart of Calgary for three days of inspiration, innovation, and community.

Hosted at the iconic **Fairmont Palliser**, this year's convention will offer dynamic keynote speakers, hands-on educational sessions, off-site adventures, and countless opportunities to network with peers and partners in the industry. Whether you're a seasoned fair organizer, a service provider, or a first-time attendee, the CAFE Convention is your chance to learn, share, and grow.

From honoring excellence through our national awards, to hearing from Canadian comedy legend Brent Butt, to discovering the latest trends on the tradeshow floor—there's something for everyone.

Save your place

The countdown is on! Join us for three unforgettable days of learning, laughter, and connection at the 2025 CAFE Convention. **We've extended the early bird registration deadline to August 30!**

[Secure your spot now at the best price here!](#)



Why Attend?

- **Inspiring Keynotes** – Including opening speaker Brent Butt
- **Hands-On Learning** – Through panels, workshops, and case studies
- **Live Entertainment** – Celebrate our vibrant fair and exhibition culture
- **Unmatched Networking** – Meet peers from across Canada
- **Audience** – 200+ delegates from fairs, agricultural societies, and event organizations nationwide

Off-Site

After our morning keynote, we'll head to the Stampede Grounds for a guided tour and a special experience with BMO and SAM, a perfect blend of fun, learning, and connection.

Hotel Accommodations

We've secured special rates at the Fairmont Palliser, but rooms are limited.

Book early to get the best deal!

Brent Butt headlines the convention



We're thrilled to welcome one of Canada's most beloved comedians and creators, **Brent Butt**, as our opening speaker at the 2025 CAFE Convention in Calgary!

Born and raised in the small farming town of **Tisdale, Saskatchewan**, Brent brings a heartfelt and hilarious perspective on rural life, making him the perfect fit for our community. Best known as the creator and star of the iconic sitcom **Corner Gas**, Brent's work is celebrated for its sharp wit, relatable storytelling, and genuine appreciation for small-town charm.

He's not only an **award-winning stand-up comedian** but also the **author of the best-selling novel Huge**, and a highly sought-after speaker who continues to tour the country. His humor, warmth, and stories will kick off the convention with energy and laughter you won't want to miss.

Be part of the 2025 CAFE performer showcase

Each year, CAFE selects a limited number of performers to take the spotlight during the Convention, an exclusive opportunity to present your act to a national audience of fair managers, programmers, and event buyers from across Canada.

Whether you're a musician, variety act, or specialty performer, this is your moment to shine live in front of decision-makers representing 200+ Canadian fairs and exhibitions.

Performance formats:

- **Musical & Variety Acts:** 18 minutes during an evening dinner
- **Strolling Acts:** 10 minutes during a lunch or break
- **Video Submissions:** 5-minute clip during a lunch or break

Please note

Spots are limited and will be curated based on the schedule and the diversity of performance types. Don't miss this chance to take the stage in front of industry leaders from across Canada!

Register Your Showcase Here!



Tradeshow

Explore the latest in products, services, and innovations that power Canada's fairs and exhibitions.

The CAFE Tradeshow is a dynamic hub where vendors and delegates connect directly. From midway operators and ticketing platforms to agriculture tech, insurance, food service, and marketing solutions — this is your opportunity to:

- Build relationships with suppliers and service providers
- Discover cutting-edge tools to streamline operations
- Engage with vendors offering exclusive convention pricing
- Find inspiration for your own fair or exhibition

Our tradeshow is fully integrated into the convention experience, with dedicated viewing hours, coffee breaks, and interactive activations to ensure maximum visibility and foot traffic.



Discover new products, trends, and ideas at our one-day tradeshow.

Interested in exhibiting?
Visit our website and sign up to participate!

[For more information, click here!](#)



CAFE National Awards

Help us recognize the best in Canadian fairs and exhibitions by submitting your entries for the 2025 CAFE Awards. From outstanding programming to inspiring leadership and innovation, these awards celebrate the individuals and organizations shaping our industry.

Award Categories:

- Innovation Award
- Service Member of the Year
- Canadian Fair Champion
- Roll of Honour
- Central Canada Exhibition Youth Education Scholarship

New for 2025:

We're proud to introduce the **Central Canada Exhibition Youth Education Scholarship**, supporting young leaders in attending the CAFE Convention to grow, connect, and contribute to our vibrant industry.

Submit your entries today and be part of celebrating excellence! Visit canadian-fairs.ca for details and deadlines.

“Hosted at the iconic Fairmont Palliser, this year’s convention will offer dynamic keynote speakers, hands-on educational sessions, off-site adventures, and countless opportunities to network with peers and partners in the industry”



Support the CAFE Convention by donating to our auction!

Your donation helps strengthen Canada’s fair and exhibition industry. Funds raised support the development of new programs, enhanced member benefits, and valuable industry resources.

Live Auction

Featuring high-value items (**\$600 and above**), the Live Auction is a highlight of the convention! Past popular items have included:

- **Sports Memorabilia**

Signed jerseys, equipment, or collectibles

- **Music Memorabilia**

Autographed instruments or albums

- **Travel Experiences**

Vacation packages, airfare, hotel stays, excursions

- **Event Tickets**

Broadway shows, concerts, or professional sports games

- **High-Value Merchandise**

Tablets, mobile devices, drones, cameras, fine art, rare wine or scotch packages, butchered meat packs, or even a one-year car/truck lease

Silent Auction

Perfect for unique or themed items at a variety of price points:

- **Retail & Digital**

Gift certificates, Amazon/iTunes gift cards, loyalty points

- **Themed Gift Baskets**

Curated collections for foodies, spa lovers, travelers, and more

Tax Receipts Available:

For items valued at \$250 or more, a charitable tax receipt may be issued with proof of fair market value.

Donate now!

We are still looking for Sponsorship!

Find out about our sponsorship package here!



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**Look for us at the 2025 CAFE
Convention in Calgary!**



Saddle Up For Tomorrow Convention 2025

Calgary, AB | Nov. 19-21, 2025

Join hundreds of professionals from across Canada for three inspiring days of **learning, networking, and celebration**. Whether you're a seasoned fair manager or a new volunteer, the CAFE Convention offers real-world insights, creative strategies, and a community that understands your world.

[For more information, click here!](#)

