

**Fyre Festival: The Music Festival Disaster**

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## **Organization**

### **General Background**

William Z. McFarland, also known as Billy McFarland, is the main Co-founder of Fyre Media and Fyre Festival that was founded in 2016. When McFarland dropped out of Bucknell University, he started his first company Spling that had the same idea as Google+ that failed eventually because of no funding. After Spling, a few years later in 2013 he created Magnesis which was a “black card” credit card company that targeted the rich Millennial generation but failed due to customer complaints about the company. After two failed businesses, Billy McFarland teamed up with famous rapper Ja Rule and they co-founded the infamous Fyre Media which is the parent company to Fyre Festival.

Fyre Media was an on demand service that makes booking the most influential artists, celebrities, athletes, models, and entertainers an easy one click process instead of dealing with the hassle of finding out how to book them yourself. Ja Rule and Billy McFarland first publicly announced this idea at the Web Summit conference and got a good response since they found a solution to booking talent and all the complications with it. The concept of the App and Website was revolutionary and before Fyre Media you could never book an artist for a birthday party in one step.

To promote this talent booking website and App, Ja Rule and McFarland thought of the idea of the Fyre Festival. The Fyre festival was advertised as a luxury music festival in the Bahamas that would take place in April 2017. They decided to shoot a video to promote the festival and many famous models were in attendance. The promotional video that Fyre Media released on December 12, 2016 showed private planes, models in bikinis partying, beautiful shots of the island and of the beaches, jet skis, boats, top headliner artists, and sold the idea of

the party of a lifetime. The party of a lifetime would turn into the music festival disaster of the year.

### **Company Environment**

The Frye Media team and the Fyre Festival team were two different teams in two different locations. The Fyre Media team that was developing the website and App were headquartered in New York City, while the Fyre Festival team was located in the Bahamas on first Pablo Escobar's Island then on Great Exuma where the Fyre festival was eventually held. McFarland hired Jerry Media Inc. team to do the advertising and social media for the fyre festival and were only given content from the Bahama shoot with the models. The Fyre festival team that was on the Island of Great Exuma that were creating the event were not in communication with the advertising team or Fyre Media. There was a major lack of communication by McFarland when asked important questions about the event from employees. He essentially told his employees that it would be all good and that money was coming and they would figure it out, but never actually helped. McFarland also kept firing employees who kept telling him that it's not possible for the music festival to be ready.

### **Weaknesses and Strengths**

The first and major strength that Fyre Festival had was the influencer strength and Social Media strategy they built. While the major top models were filming the promotional video in the Bahamas they also posted Instagram pictures of themselves which reached a lot of media outlets. Fyre Festival reached out to about 400 famous artists, comedians, models, and entertainers to post an orange tile on instagram promoting Fyre Festival which they all got paid for and were promised a private beach house for them and two other friends to have for the event. The Promotional video went viral and so did the orange tiles and the social reach it had was

incredible. Media outlets were talking about the Fyre festival and the models teaming up with music festivals was a huge topic. The major weakness Fyre Festival had was the unpreparedness, miscommunication, and no transparency within the company itself. McFarland also was a huge weakness himself because he was the only one in control of the finances of the operation.

### **Problem**

The Public Relations Problem with the Fyre Festival is that it was fraud and they lied to ticket holders about the experience that they were going to have. When the Fyre Festival website launched on December 12, 2016 they had many different ticket packages and living accommodations to choose from. They were described as luxury canopy tents like Coachellas and had sketches of each. They advertised a 1 million dollar treasure hunt, playing with pigs, luxury beach chairs and tents to reserve and so much more for a hefty price. The Festival sold out within days and was a huge achievement for a first time music festival. They put the map of the island- that wasn't really an island- and cut off the bottom of it so it looks like it's an island surrounded by water. Fyre Festival employees only had 6-8 weeks to build the infrastructure of the festival and have everything done but they ran out of money. Less than a month before the festival the ticket holders received another email about uploading money to their virtual wristband wallet that they would receive when they got there but they never ended up receiving the wristbands. Fyre Festival employees and locals that helped build the festival knew it wasn't going to be a luxury festival and begged McFarland to cancel the festival but he didn't. When ticket holders flew in that was when the disaster really started. The living conditions they were promised were no longer what they thought it was going to be. The tents were left over hurricane Katrina tents and a lot were damaged from the rainstorm the previous day. Fyre Festival did not have enough food and water for the festival attendees and didn't have planes chartered to take

them home. Ticket holders started documenting their experience and uploading it to social media which was where Fyre Festival died. Fyre Festival was not fully transparent with consumers who had purchased tickets who thought it would be a luxury vacation for them.

### **Key Publics**

#### **Internal**

The internal publics in this case were the employees that had worked for Fyre Media and Festival and Billy McFarland himself. McFarland was lying to employees and not telling them the full truth the entire time they were working for him and he later sabotaged himself for keeping employees in the dark about where the investor money was coming from and kept firing employees that were telling him the cold truth about putting on this festival needed more time and work to turn out the way they had imagined. Employees after the festival had been laid off and were not getting paid the amount they should have and some never got paid for the labor they did. Respected Professionals that got hired and fired from Fyre now have a bad image of them because of how persuaded they were by McFarland and his vision.

#### **External**

The external publics that were involved in this case are thousands. The first people who got affected by the Fyre Festival were investors that had pulled investments out of other music festivals like Coachella and Burning Man or the random investors McFarland had influenced enough to invest. The second people who got affected by the Fyre festival were the ones who paid thousands of dollars to attend the music festival and to have good perks. The third people who also were affected were the famous models and influencers who advertised the festival on social media which made it go viral. The entire Island of Great Exuma were greatly affected by

the festival because they were the ones who did the hard labor and built the infrastructure and spent all day and night helping prepare for it. The one restaurant near the festival who fed all the attendees was also affected because the owner had to pay 50,000 dollars out of her own pocket to pay the employees she had helping her feed the thousand in attendance for the festival. The Owner received no money or apology from McFarland and still to this day gets upset to talk about the disaster that happened in 2016. The outside companies Fyre bought and rented stuff from and didn't end up paying were affected by the Fyre Festival because they didn't get the profit from it. The Bahamas and Great Exuma signed a contract with Fyre Festival to have the festival once a year for five years and would boost the Bahamian economy but after it failed their economy plummeted because they had to do all the clean up and disposal of what was left after the festival.

### **Analyzing the Key Messages**

#### **Communication Timing**

The entire Fyre Festival communication timing was within 6-8 weeks. They were planning an entire music festival from the ground up within half a year which on average music festivals plan out a year or more in advance to be prepared. Influencers who had posted the orange tile had not received any information about the event until Marc Weinstein, a Music Festival consultant that Billy McFarland hired half way through. Communication with the music festival attendees was silent. Many of them reached out to the company instagram and email asking good questions about the festival and how and when flights were and many did not even get a response. The Fyre Team was writing the public service apology while the festival ticket holders were still on the Island and in the apology they started off saying Due to things that were out of our control which wasn't true. Silence was the worst option they could have done because

that's what made them go to twitter and start complaining about not getting responses and information.

### **Use of Language**

The language used in all the news releases, articles, documentaries about the failed Fyre music festival were all factual based on statements and video evidence of the scam. The language used by Fyre Festival and their advertisements were persuasive and fun and they built this fake image of what they wanted the festival to be like when it wasn't achievable to begin with. Fyre Festival continued to lie after the event and say they had no idea it would be the way it was and unforeseen things happened when his employees literally begged him not to commit to the festival and to cancel it or push it back.

### **Written Elements**

The written elements that the Fyre Festival team came up with were to target a specific target market which were very rich millennials that lived in New York City or Los Angeles that party with celebrities or are celebrities and influencers. The most common written elements were on social media, youtube, news media coverage, twitter and emails. The response from the promotional video was amazing and they really did sell the idea of this perfect music festival in the Bahamas with models and exotic food that makes people feel like they would be left out. Fyre Festival and Billy McFarland are super persuasive and can sell the idea of luxury for anyone.

### **Spoken Elements**

The spoken elements came from Billy McFarland himself in media interviews and even a Hulu Documentary about the entire music festival from day one. Many of the employees were vlogging casually about the experience they were having and giving updates about how much it

was going to be a disaster. Billy McFarland had been interviewed right after he officially canceled the festival and said that the V1 phase had failed but that wouldn't bring him down and that he would try again with V2.

### **Visual Elements**

The main visual elements used to campaign this entire Fyre Music Festival was the one shoot they did on Pablo Escobar's Island with top models including: Bella Hadid, Emily Ratajkowski and Hailey Baldwin and other models. They had the models play with pigs, walk on the beach, get on huge yachts and lounge in bikinis which was a major selling point and they seemed like they were having a lot of fun. They had the Jerry Media team come up with an entire social media strategy by just using the shots from that first shoot and they were very successful.

## **Communication Strategies and Tactics**

### **Strategies**

Fyre Festival used organizational media tactics including: websites, video, and social media to promote the Music festival and they also used news media coverage to promote it by telling the models to post pictures from the shoot. The strategies they used to promote the festival were social media strategies that Jerry Inc can take credit for and the influential reach they had from the celebrities. The way they kept it hidden from ticket holders was by removing the sketches of the living accommodations on the website when they knew they only had hurricane tents and silence from the company about any updates to ticket holders' questions.

Fyre Festival used organizational media tactics to try to save the reputation after the event was a written statement posted on the Instagram page and Website to apologize for any



inconvenience they had. The statement was about half a page long and it was again not truthful because they didn't take full responsibility for the fraud luxury festival.

### **Critical Analysis**

#### **Personal Analysis**

Personally, I love Music Festivals and overall the music festival culture. I have been to Bonnaroo, Music Midtown, and Lollapalooza and have had great times and not so great times. It's one of my goals to go attend Coachella or Burning Man because of the music festival history they have and the fashion that emerges at music festivals. I remember hearing about the Fyre Festival because I was a sophomore in highschool and that was when I started getting into going to concerts and music festivals. I remember hearing about Fyre so my friends and I went on the website and yes they had a lot of cool things but there was no information/common questions/or real photos of the campground. I remember all my friends wanted to go because it was going to be in the Bahamas and everyone wanted to go for spring break in april but with so little information none of our parents would let us.

Overall, I think Fyre did a really really good job at their social media campaign because that's what built the entire hype of the music festival. They used Billy McFarlands social status and the power that comes with that high social status to help this idea of a luxury Bahama music festival that would happen every year for five years and people would be able to have beach villas and private yachts with chefs. But, as we learned, you can have a great social media presence and the followers but if you can't keep your word and not be transparent you will lose your consumers.

## Recommendations

If I was working for Fyre Festival during this time I would have talked to Billy and push back the date to the next year so they could have the time to get prepared, but, if that wasn't an option because the funds were gone I would have told him to release a statement being truthful before people who purchased tickets came to the Island to prepare them for the worst and to not come if they didn't like the conditions of the music festival campsite. If he wasn't going to take the right direction and be truthful I probably would have worked with the locals and created the FyreFraud website with them to expose the truth of the festival instead of lying to everyone for weeks and weeks about the truth of the music festival not being as luxurious as described.

## Supplemental Materials

[Announcing Fyre Festival](#)

[Watch FYRE: The Greatest Party That Never Happened | Netflix Official Site](#)

[Watch FYRE FRAUD Streaming Online | Hulu \(Free Trial\)](#)

[Twitter Fyre Fraud account](#)



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