

## With creativity, businesses get share of Comic-Con cash

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Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune

Steve Mader, owner of Sign A Rama, cuts a wall covering for Ciro's Pizzeria, which is undergoing a Comic-Con transformation into Cartoon Network Cafe.



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Travis Ahern had hoped to rent out his family's downtown warehouse to a long-term restaurant tenant, but when Disney came calling last year to take over the 15,000-square-foot building to plug a couple of its movies during Comic-Con, it was an offer too lucrative to refuse.

The mammoth meet may be in town just a few days out of the year, but enterprising entrepreneurs like Ahern have found creative ways to spin comic-book and Hollywood fandom into pure gold.

This year, the film studio is returning to the Culy Warehouse to re-create a movie set from its film “Tron: Legacy,” expected to be released later this year. The redo of the warehouse interior, which is netting the Ahern family \$60,000 in rent, is so hush-hush that security guards were hired to keep passers-by from peering in through a door that was slightly ajar to get a sneak preview.

“We definitely love Comic-Con,” Ahern said. “We hope they stay here because we’ll probably work with them next year.”

Much has been made of the economic windfall Comic-Con International brings to San Diego each July when it delivers more than 130,000 devoted fans who gobble up hotel rooms from downtown to North County, dine out at casual restaurants and upscale steakhouses, and book space in large hotels for hot-ticket soirees.

While San Diego’s largest convention isn’t a make-or-break proposition for most businesses, in the eyes of the tourism and hospitality industry, Comic-Con has become San Diego’s beloved superhero who swoops in to save the day, especially during shaky economic times when a surge in revenue makes up for sluggish business.

It’s been affectionately dubbed San Diego’s annual Super Bowl.

A recently released economic analysis commissioned by the Convention Center Corp. showed that Comic-Con contributes more than \$163 million to the regional economy, which includes both direct spending for lodging, food and transportation, as well as indirect expenditures for employee wages and goods and services needed to support the hospitality industry.

That economic bonanza has taken on more importance as Comic-Con International weighs whether it will remain in San Diego once its contract expires in 2012 or move to Anaheim or Los Angeles, which have larger convention centers.

Admittedly, medical conventions that bring well-heeled anesthesiologists and neuroscientists to town generate considerably more revenue for convention hotels via catered meals and receptions, some hoteliers acknowledge. On the other hand, don’t expect those groups to shell out the kind of big bucks the Hilton San Diego Bayfront is commanding to promote upcoming film releases and TV shows.

Consider the \$70,000 Universal Pictures spent to envelope the hotel facade with a monolithic graphic advertising its film, “Scott Pilgrim vs. The World.” And let’s not forget the 50 grand another studio doled out to take over the hotel’s park to re-create some good-natured jousting and sword fighting. HBO even got into the advertising act and is paying the Hilton \$18,000 to paper the hotel’s nine elevators with advertisements for its vampire series “True Blood.”

“This piece of business (from Comic-Con) is worth about \$1.5 million to us through a combination of rooms, food and beverage and sponsorship vehicles like the building wrap,” said a gleeful Donovan Henson, area director of sales and marketing for Hiltons of San Diego. “A weekend in the summertime is going to be busy in San Diego, but with 125,000 people in San Diego exposed to our hotel who may come back, there’s real value to that.”

Also grateful for the business Comic-Con generates is Ciro’s Pizzeria, which has partnered with the Cartoon Network to reinvent its restaurant as the Cartoon Network Cafe, with menu items such as Punk Bustin’ BBQ and Lumpy Princess pizzas, walls lined with oversized graphics of network characters and shows, and flat-screen monitors featuring Cartoon Network shows.

“We get more exposure, and then there’s the additional traffic they’ll drive from the convention center,” said Managing Partner Mike Georgopoulos, who’s beefing up hiring for the expected onslaught. “For every year for the last five years, we’ve broken the previous year’s record during Comic-Con, and this year we’ll shatter

the record.”

When prospective tenants come calling to rent space in Rex Edhlund’s Industry Showroom just blocks away from the convention center, Comic-Con, like it or not, is a required part of the negotiation process. He’s nabbed two high-paying clients willing to shell out \$10,000 this week to take over his 6th Avenue showroom space. That means his clothing designers, massage therapist, florist and other tenants know in advance they have to clear out temporarily to make way for the big spenders.

“Comic-Con was one of the reasons I took this space. I figured during the convention I could rent it out for a significant amount,” said Edhlund, who’s even made a little pocket change brokering rental deals for other downtown venues. “My business plan wouldn’t have worked without Comic-Con.”

What sets Comic-Con apart from most other large meetings is the widespread, trickle-down effect it has beyond the city’s downtown core. Once much coveted rooms near the convention center quickly sell out, lodging in Mission Valley and beyond reaps the benefits and fill up as well, as do outlying restaurants.

Joseph Kruevi, managing director of the Doubletree Mission Valley, expects his hotel to be fully booked by the time Comic-Con launches this evening, and even his Doubletree property in Rancho Peñasquitos will be busier because of the convention, he says.


So, too, will be VIP Pedicabs, which expects to shuttle three times the downtown passengers it normally handles with its fleet of 16 cabs. Manager Ali Horuz is even picking up extra money during the convention by using the pedicabs to advertise programming for the CW network and Starz movie channel.

“This is one of the best events San Diego has,” said Horuz. “Maybe on our cabs we should say, ‘Keep Comic-Con in San Diego.’”

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