

On letting your work speak for itself



Festival director and curator Moni Saldaña on the ideology behind the NRMAL Festival, and the difficulties in creating something creative, equitable, and truly diverse.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2367 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Curation](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Production](#), [Business](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

It's so easy to assume that running a festival is a fun job. I'm sure there are many challenges, from making sure that there's funding or sponsors, to securing ticket sales, to dealing with all the safety guidelines, and making sure that the festival has a mission and a good curatorial program. What are some of the biggest challenges of running a festival?

Yeah, a lot of people think, "Oh, you do a music festival, you meet a lot of people." I know a lot of people that do the same thing as me so they understand the overall challenges. But people who are not very familiar with it think my job is just booking bands and having them play the festival. That's only a small part of what we do. With NRMAL, our biggest challenge is actually our biggest asset, which is the festival's programming. That's because it's what attracts most of the people who attend the festival, because we book artists who normally do not come to Mexico. Each year we think, "What are we gonna do now?" We do not think, "What are people listening to?" or "What are the top 10 artists that we can book?" or "What are other festivals' headliners?"

We always have to dig deeper and that's basically our biggest challenge. It's really hard for us to convince people to pay for a ticket to see bands that they do not necessarily know. We always thought of the festival as a longterm project. We always knew it was gonna take us several years to just make sure that people understood what type of festival we're doing.

The funding part is hard, as well, because funders always try to compare you. The sponsors ask questions like, "What other festivals are similar to yours?" They always try to make a reference to what you do and we're trying to do something else. The core of the festival and the essence of it is so different. So always trying to sell that is really hard. We are also very protective of the festival itself. We've made a lot of hard decisions throughout these years to maintain and protect it—we don't want to sell out and we don't want to have things like branded stages.

I love my job so much, but the struggles of making it a successful business are real, especially in a city like Mexico City, where there's a lot of things happening every day, and new festivals emerge all the time. We are also in a city where, aside from all of the other things that are happening, you have a really big entertainment monopoly. It's hard to thrive as an independent promoter. But there is consistency in what we do, and we respect our fans—and that trust that we built is what sustains us.

You joined the festival when it was just starting, and you have learned most things on the run or by just doing it. How do you manage the stress of this, and not burn out?

The answer is that I truly love what I do. We are all so passionate about the project, and that is what keeps us going, because we believe that we're not just another festival. We believe that we play a very specific role and that we are a platform that can connect not only bands with new audiences, but people as a community.

What motivates us is to see that we've achieved certain things, or that we've booked some bands who have never performed in Mexico before. It's my passion, but it's so stressful and sometimes you sacrifice a lot of personal things.

The music and entertainment industries are changing constantly. Is it possible to have projections and plan ahead? Is it doable to have a short, medium, and longterm strategy?

It is really hard, because everything changes and you depend on so many factors that are outside of your control. We learned that the hard way. At the beginning we used to do a lot of very positive projections, and we do always try to think positively because we believe in the festival so much. We had positive projections and then reality came and we realized we had projected things in a very wrong way. We've learned the hard way, too—not to be pessimistic, but to be more realistic about our projections. That has allowed us to keep doing this. That's why we've made certain difficult decisions like moving the festival from Monterrey to Mexico City, or doing a one-day festival instead of a two-day festival. Those types of hard decisions are necessary to maintain the business.

Right. The festival started in Monterrey, which is probably the second largest city in Mexico, and then it moved to Mexico City. Is growing the only option once you have something that works? Is expanding always necessary?

We don't want to have that many people at the festival because one of the things that people value from us is the intimacy. So for us, it was not a matter of that. In Monterrey, we were starting to get stuck with a lot of things in terms of permits and legal stuff. But the most important thing is that even when the festival was happening in Monterrey, there were a lot of people coming in from other cities. So it's obviously more affordable or easy for people to come to Mexico City than to Monterrey. We are a niche festival, so it was easier for our niche audience to come to Mexico City. In Monterrey, we'd reached our very small niche of people that could attend the festival, so moving to Mexico City allowed us to keep experimenting with the lineup, which is the festival's essence and mission.

What does success for a music festival look like? Is it possible to measure it? It seems like success should be reflected in ways other than ticket sales.

We do see it as a business, because we want to maintain it. We do see how much we spend and how much money comes in. That's how it's normally measured, and for us that's important because we want to keep doing the festival—it's a longterm project. We're obviously learning every year and we still haven't found the magic formula for this to be successful.

We also know that building our community, keeping fans happy, and having bands talking about their good experience is important. That's how we know the festival served something else besides just having a good time—we're building the community that we want to create.

Some major festivals seem to be so much more focused on the Instagram pictures, having a VIP section, or the "influencers" that attend. Then you have something like the Fyre Festival, which was super disturbing. NRMAL does not have a VIP section—is this decision deliberate?

That's one of our core things. We don't have any VIP sections. We just want everyone to feel comfortable. We don't like having any barriers because what happens when you have those things is that people get distracted. Even with the glamorous backstage areas with open bars, that only gets people distracted from what's happening on stage. The reason why we do the festival is because we want people to enjoy the music. When you add all these distractions people don't pay attention to the music. And it's like, "Yeah, I had an amazing time, I met all of these people but I didn't listen to anything." We want people to be present and enjoy the music that's happening and to focus on that. We also encourage artists to arrive early, to see other bands. It's a choice that we've made and that we will maintain.

What are some of these distractions that you mention?

You can do all these activities. For example, you can get a free tattoo, or there's a photo booth, or you can get all of the drinks you want. It's not that those things are bad—I understand that there are festivals that are bigger and that need those things, and I'm not against that. But for our festival, we are very sure that that's not what we want to do.

As the festival's Director, you work with a lot of people on different levels and you have to deal with many personalities and egos, all of them asking for attention simultaneously. It must be tempting to fall into this allure of only hanging with musicians and people in the industry. How do you deal with that? How do you manage to be assertive?

When I was starting out, I wanted to prove to myself and to others that I was good. I was afraid to say no, and I think that's something that is very Mexican: I said yes to everything, and when I shouldn't have done that, disappointment arrived and things went really badly.

With things like organizing a festival, you say yes to everyone, you promise many things to fans and to the bands. Artists and promoters ask for a lot of things on their riders or on their contracts and I was like, "Yes, yes, yes." And then they came back and said: "Where is everything that I asked for?" And that's when the attitude shifts, and that's when people get mad and when things go badly.

I try to be very honest and straightforward about everything. Because if you don't, that's when problems emerge. Sometimes when you say no to something or you cannot commit to something, you feel like you're failing. But that is not the case. You have to realize what your capabilities are, or what you're willing to do. It's just accepting the fact that *that* is your reality, that's what you can do, and just doing that has value.

For me, it was just demystifying that aspect of failure about saying no. Now I know what saying no means. It is actually caring about the value we're creating. When you're inside of an organization, it is so easy to be so immersed in what you do and forget that you've done important things and that you're creating something.

I've learned throughout the process to manage myself and be realistic about what things are possible and what things are not. That's something that we've done—not only inside of the organization, but also with our vendors and our fans. We're straightforward about what you will get in the festival—this is what we're gonna provide, and this is how the experience is. If you dig it, come. If you don't, you don't have to come. We've learned not to promise what we can't deliver. With artists, we explain the type of vibe that the festival has. We encourage them to leave their dressing rooms and meet each other and see other bands, to actually get the experience that a fan would have. I've learned that it makes the total difference.

One of NRMAL's values is to have gender representation and diversity in its lineup. How do you curate the lineup?

Since the beginning of the festival, diversity was a really important thing because we always wanted to have artists from different countries and from different genres. That was always present. Also, we are aware that who you program not only impacts yourself and the bands that play—it impacts the people who attend, and who are trusting you and are paying for their ticket.

I truly believe that culture is a really important part of constructing society. It's like, "Okay, we're not gonna change the world doing a music festival, but how can we impact the lives of these people?" It's just so easy to say, "No, there are no female projects, there is no diversity." It's so easy just not to do something about it. If we can give a platform to more people to express themselves on stage, we're gonna do that. For us, it's not like we have to fill in the quota. Instead, having a diverse lineup is what makes the festival experience so fun and so rewarding.

The entertainment industry can be very male-dominated, and asking for funding, negotiating contracts, and dealing with the local authorities about permits must be really challenging. What kind of advice would you give to women

who want to start their own platform or project but might feel discouraged after experiencing a hostile environment?

Sometimes it can be very discouraging because reality is not fair. But what matters is what you do and how you do it. Your actions speak for themselves. I want to be coherent with my life. I always say practice what you preach. It's so easy just to post online, "Oh, I care about women, I care about diversity," but what are you doing about it?

If you have an idea, or if you have a project, you need to work really hard. Do not get discouraged by outside factors because, in the end, your work is going to speak for itself. Where you put in your work, people are gonna connect. People are going to believe in it and they're going to help you. People are going to try to kick you down, or they will try and discourage you. I've cried in meetings with sponsors, I've cried with my boss, I've cried with my team, but don't give up. Believe in what you do, and trust that your work is going to speak for itself.

Moni Saldaña Recommends:

1. Kidding starring Jim Carrey and produced by Michel Gondry and After Life by Ricky Gervais. Both smart, dark, funny, deep, and inspiring shows.
2. Rework by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson, a straightforward book that will inspire you to keep it simple and achieve more. "What you do is your legacy."
3. "In The No" podcast by Kaitlin Prest on Radiolab about sexual consent.
4. TEDx Talk "How Great Leaders Inspire Action" by Simon Sinek.
5. The book Principles by Ray Dalio.

Name

Moni Saldaña

Vocation

Festival Director, Events Producer, Curator

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