

Carniomics – The New Economics of Carnival

by

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Coming out of the Christmas season, Trinidad and Tobago Carnival celebrations are the focal point of the national consciousness. Sights, sounds and activities are now moulded into “the Greatest Show on Earth”. We may all recognise and participate in this national festival, but how many of us have really paid attention to the economics of Carnival? Let’s talk business.

Background

Carnival began as a Catholic celebration in Italy called “carnevale” which means “to put away the meat”. As a wild costume party the day before the start of fasting during Lent, this practice spread to the other Catholic nations in Europe. As the French settlers began to arrive in Trinidad around 1785, they brought “carnevale” with them. Gatherings were held where the planters put on masks, wigs, and other decorations and danced the night away.

The African slaves recognised this practice as being parallel to their own cultural traditions of parading in costumes and masks. They began their own celebrations and incorporated their own traditions of using grasses, beads, shells and feathers to make costumes. In 1838, when slavery was abolished, the free Africans took their celebrations to the streets. Since then Carnival has grown as a major part of our national identity and has grabbed the attention of the world.

Far from the days of grass and feathers, Carnival has grown into big business. Every aspect of this celebration has a commercial aspect that is explored with each successive year towards earning revenue. A national celebration that was tethered to religion and African heritage has been transformed into a goliath of capitalism to be conquered by profiteers.

Mas Bands

Mas Bands represent the focal point of Carnival and, apart from creative expression and fun-loving revellers; they generate mega-profits. This year, extra-large bands of over 3,000 persons (all size categorisations are National Carnival Bands Association (NCBA) specified) have an average individual cost of TT\$2,000 to TT\$4,000. With an estimate of 5 extra-large bands comprising at least 3,000 persons each, this translates to a minimum TT\$ 45 million dollars in revenue.

With large bands comprising of 1001 to 3000 persons at an individual cost of TT\$1,500 to TT\$2,500, medium-sized bands comprising of 301 to 1000 persons at an individual cost of TT\$700 to TT\$1,500, and with small bands comprising of 51 to 300 persons to mini-bands with 11 to 50 persons absorbing the remaining Carnival masqueraders at low cost, the revenue derived by Mas bands alone can be expected to approach the TT\$100 million dollar mark this year.

There is a lot of money to be made around the focal point of Mas bands apart from the bands themselves. A beehive of artisans, performers, DJs, transportation, security forces, sanitary workers and street vendors surround these bands to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars in income. The spider-web of economic activity centred around a Mas band is often as substantial as the band itself.

Carnival Fetes

Carnival fetes have grown in significance over the years and from January 6th to February 24th 2007 there will be no less than 300 Carnival fetes in Trinidad and Tobago. Big fetes, with an estimated crowd of between 2,000 and 10,000 persons cost TT\$60 – TT\$ 120. Admission revenues to these fetes alone will range in the millions, and with patrons expected to spend at least TT\$150 each on food and drinks, this adds up to further millions in potential revenue.

All-inclusive and now, ultra-inclusive fetes, have risen to prominence in recent years, especially given concerns regarding crime. On average, a ticket to an all-inclusive fete will cost between TT\$300 and TT\$700 and with crowds in the range of 200 to 2,500 persons, this add up to estimated average earnings of TT\$ 625,000 per all-inclusive. With no less than 50 of these all-inclusive parties this year, this translates to over TT\$30 million in revenue to these organisers.

The Performers

These fetes also represent a lucrative financial avenue for performers, who are the linchpins of these fetes. Promoters who hire top notch artistes like Machel Montano HD, Bunji Garlin, Destra Garcia and Shurwayne Winchester are almost guaranteed a sell-out event. With appearance fees in the range of TT\$ 5,000 to TT\$ 10,000, top acts make top dollar, chalking up two to three appearances on any Carnival weekend.

Bands and lesser-known artistes also cash in on the fete industry with big name bands raking in fees in the range of TT\$ 15,000 per performance and average artists earning up to TT\$ 2,000 per gig. For many of these performers, the carnival season represents a welcome windfall. Altogether, the Carnival season adds up to big bucks for the performers who make it memorable.

Sponsors

Sponsors also line up to eke out the most mileage from the Carnival product. Carib, Stag, bmobile, Digicel, Angostura, Toyota, Johnnie Walker, Hennessey, Blue Waters, Smirnoff Ice and Fernandez, to name just a few, are partnering with fete organisers and band leaders in an effort to capitalise on publicity and revenue within the Carnival market.

Carib Brewery is sponsoring over 70 events for Carnival 2007 including a number of all-inclusive fetes. Digicel and bmobile have also taken their rivalry into the Carnival arena as they have become big-time sponsors of various Carnival events. Carnival is big business and these sponsors are ensuring that they get their piece of the pie.

With giant corporate sponsors like these in the mix, top-billing artists are headlining Carnival marketing campaigns. More exclusive powerhouse partnerships, for instance the coupling between bmobile and Machel Montano HD are now commonplace.

The Tents

Tents are also a cornerstone of the Carnival psyche and represent an avenue where aficionados of the local performing arts enjoy the latest offerings of their favourite artistes. This year there are some twenty Kaiseo and Humorous Tents across the country, looking to capitalise on the popularity of the nation's calysonian, soca and chutney artistes and comedians.

Government Subventions

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago plays an important role in ensuring that Carnival celebrations are successful. Government subventions, as dispensed through the Ministry of Culture and relevant agencies such as the National Carnival Commission (NCC), seek to maintain and develop the Greatest Show on Earth. This year, the overall budget for NCC, which includes NCC's Administrative and all related Carnival costs, is a reported TT\$ 79 million.

Mainstream cultural organisations receive support through these mechanisms, such as PanTrinbago who received TT\$ 11 million in 2006. Most importantly, this financial support from Government ensures the sustainability of Carnival celebrations at a grassroots level, such as regional Carnival celebrations.

Tourism

Visitors to our country represent a viable means of income with capacity bookings during this season.

According to the Ministry of Tourism, in terms of Carnival visitors to Trinidad and Tobago, there were 40,455 in 2004, 42,000 in 2005 and 40,000 in 2006. This year, there are expected to be between 50,000 and 60,000 visitors stemming from an intense marketing campaign, catalysed by the attention brought via our appearance in the 2006 FIFA World Cup Finals held in Germany.

With an average tourist expenditure of TT\$306 per day in 2004, this figure is expected to rise to an estimated TT\$400 given the effects of inflation on the cost of living. For a two-week stay, this translates to staggering potential revenue base of TT\$ 308 million. This year, when these visitors leave after the Carnival season, the revenues from Departure Tax at the airport alone will add up to millions of TT dollars.

The Ministry of Tourism's figures for 2004, estimated for a two-week stay, showed that German visitors spent TT\$6,000, averaging 10% more than Americans who spent TT\$5,400 and 160% more than Canadians who spent TT\$ 2,300. This is good news for local businesses, given that many of the increased visitors this year are expected to arrive from Germany, as a result of heavy tourism marketing.

Many sectors of the economy benefit from these tourists including local artisans, restaurants and the hotels where these guests stay. Visitors can spend anywhere from TT\$300 to over TT\$1,000 per night at one of these hotels and the average stay of these visitors is in the range of 1 to 2 weeks. The intense economic activity surrounding Carnival tourism is often the most viable source of income over an annual period.

The Sustainable Industry

To locals and visitors alike, Carnival offers a plethora of activities to become immersed in. Apart from the fetes, kaiso and humour tents and actual Carnival Monday and Tuesday celebrations, there are events like the Calypso Monarch, Calypso Queen, Young King, Panorama Finals, Junior Panorama Finals, Soca Monarch, Road March and the Groovy Soca Monarch that have a viable lasting effect on participants and witnesses alike. Apart from the prizes to be won by the participants of these events, there are a number of long-term benefits to be derived.

Last year saw a number of entertainers including, Roy Cape, Kes Dieffenthaler, Black Stalin, Rikki Jai representing Trinidad and Tobago as part of the support for the Soca Warriors in the 2006 World Cup Finals in Germany. Mas band leaders – the Mas Men – are also getting involved, and after local celebrations, they head out to get involved in other international events. Sterling examples of this are local heroes like Peter Minshall and Stephen Derek.

Performers in the Panorama competitions were traditionally comprised of temporary workers who made money sporadically. Being a steelpan player was never viewed as a profession, but due to the economic viability of Carnival, this has changed. A journey from the start of Carnival celebrations to the end of the Panorama Finals will cost one of the bigger bands in the region of TT\$ 1 million. Many bands now do international tours as demonstrated by Phase II Pan Groove in 2006, when they embarked on an international tour in addition to making appearances on German television and BBC.

Those who stand out in Trinidad and Tobago celebrations remain in demand well after the local season, leading to year-round economic viability. The architects of the local industry are in demand for Carnival celebrations in other Caribbean nations as well as parts of Canada, United States and Europe. The international demand for our local talent and expertise has led to the formation of a viable year-round industry that supports a significant part of our entertainment industry.

Employment

Carnival and its impacts upon the economy are as dynamic as they are consequential. During Carnival, a great deal of seasonal employment is generated in almost every sector of this entertainment leviathan. Carnival celebrations over the years have led to the development of persons with specialised skills, as well as a series of spin-off economic activities that sometimes extend beyond the local Carnival season.

There are artisans involved in Mas production as well as those catering to the tourist market, security personnel, transportation, street vendors and clean-up crews just to name a few. It is difficult to assess, in exact measures, just how many persons derive revenue

either directly or indirectly from the Carnival season, but the number is clearly significant.

The Transformation of Carnival

Carnival has not only undergone a transformation in terms of trying to maximise its economic viability, but it has also received a modern facelift. The introduction of technology, especially the internet, is apparent and this tool has been used for a variety of purposes ranging from marketing the event to a global audience as well as for the sale of costumes by leading Mas bands etc. This year, T&T Carnival will be viewed by the world via the entertainment channels on international cable television.

The roots of this national festival are spreading to meld various aspects of national, regional and even international culture. This is demonstrated by the fusion of previously indo-centric chutney music with traditional styles like soca and calypso as well as the incorporation of regional and international performers as part of the Carnival celebrations. Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival has grown into a global entertainment event.

The Billion Dollar Event

It can be seen from the economic aspects of Carnival discussed here, as well as advertising, transportation, liquor sales, merchandising etc.; Trinidad and Tobago Carnival has grown into a billion dollar industry.

No other single national event has far reaching socio-economic impact as Carnival, and the avenues for economic gain are far from being exhausted. Carniomics represents the measurement of vast financial influence of this significant sector of our economy.

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