

[The Morning Call](#)

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PPL CENTER IS LOOKING TO BOOK 'THINGS THAT MAKE SENSE,' OFFER SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

When John Page, chief operating officer of Comcast-Spectacor, toured Allentown's then-unfinished PPL Center in 2014, he envisioned his company running a 10,000-seat arena that would book a diverse slate of entertainment, learning along the way how audiences responded.

Officials now have 2 1/2 years of experience bringing shows to the downtown arena. And they have seen many things that have worked, with sellouts from the opening show by iconic country-rockers the Eagles, classic pop singers Neil Diamond and Elton John, country stars Carrie Underwood and Jason Aldean, Christmas prog rockers Trans Siberian Orchestra, indie-rockers Twenty One Pilots and, most recently on March 16, Florida Georgia Line.

But arena General Manager Gunnar Fox says variety still is important to the facility, which seeks to not only get as many people as possible to attend its events, but also to attract diverse clientele.

"We have the staple and the driver of everything being the Phantoms," the professional hockey team that calls PPL Center home, Fox said.

"But what other things do you use to fill out the calendar and make sure that you're providing something for everyone? Because not everybody wants to see concerts. Some people want to see Monster Jam or hockey or basketball or family shows — Disney on Ice or Cirque du Soleil, professional bull riders.

"It's trying to fill out with a little bit of everything ... more specifically on concerts, not everybody is going to do to a country show. Not everyone's going to go to an Elton John — even though everyone did."

Fox said booking PPL Center is not an exact science, but rather balancing a bunch of factors to make sure the shows work — financially and otherwise — for everyone: artists, agents, promoters, the building and fans.

"It is not so much choosing what entertainment comes in," Fox says. "It's not like I go out and say, 'Hey, I want to do Elton John and Def Leppard and Journey, Santana and Chicago this year, and we're gonna go after those five acts."

Rather, he says, it all depends on which acts are touring, whether their route brings them nearby and if they're also playing in Philadelphia, and whether booking them makes sense financially for the artists, PPL Center and the fans.

Being close to Philadelphia and having a relationship with that city's 19,000-capacity, Comcast-operated Wells Fargo Center often helps in getting bigger acts, Fox said.

"We're in the conversation for most tours and most acts that are going out," Fox said.

But, he said, "a lot of times those conversations are quick, because it's, 'Oh, that's playing majors [cities] only.' Or they're going to play outdoors, because there's also Camden to think about, with BB&T Pavilion."

Bigger artists will want to play bigger arenas such as Philadelphia's Wells Fargo Center simply to get in front of more fans, and also because larger venues can pay more without prohibitive ticket prices.

Fox said, for example, that PPL Center "certainly asked about" the tour that brings Lady Gaga to Wells Fargo Center in September, and would have been interested in getting her later in her run, after she played larger cities than Allentown. But the tour "felt that a better move for the artist was to do a second show in Philadelphia," Fox said.

"But there are some shows that need that extra stop, and the Lehigh Valley works out great. And then it's a matter of, 'OK, do they want to play PPL Center, where they can do 10,000? Do they want to play Sands [Bethlehem Event Center], where they can do 3,500? Do they want to play Allentown Fair? Do they want to play Musikfest?'"

Sometimes, circumstances work out in PPL Center's favor. The arena snagged the start of Neil Diamond's tour in 2015 because it had the availability to have him practice at the arena for a week, then do two shows.

"That one was like the perfect world," Fox said. "Sometimes they want to play markets they haven't played before. For Neil Diamond, that worked out well because we were a new building and we had the dates available for rehearsal, so it all fell into place."

Bigger acts carry bigger ticket prices, which are magnified in a smaller arena such as PPL Center, Fox said.

"I think that's definitely one thing we've tested the waters on, ticket pricing," he said. "The Eagles was a monstrous average ticket price. [Its top price of \$179.50 set a then-record for the Lehigh Valley]. But it was the first show, it was the Eagles, which is massive. And we did see that people are willing to pay for top-notch entertainment."

Elton John and Neil Diamond both sold out shows with ticket prices that topped \$150. A July 5 show by New Kids On The Block, with Paula Abdul and Boyz II Men carries a top ticket price of \$249.95.

"It's different for different acts," Fox said. "There may be 10,000 people who are willing to pay \$150 average for the Eagles, but they're not going to pay \$150 for Def Leppard, or for Lee Brice. But it's a matter of finding that sweet spot."

Fox says there is some competition with Reading's slightly smaller (7,000-capacity) Santander Arena. When Elton John last played Santander, Fox said, PPL Center was interested, but the date was between Diamond's two shows, when the Phantoms were scheduled, so the show went to Santander. The most recent show came to PPL Center.

PPL was interested in the Feb. 23 show by country star Miranda Lambert that went to Santander.

“That’s one that we were in on the conversation and the artist just decided they wanted to play a little bit of a smaller building,” he said.

Asked about what appears to be an increased interest in country acts — the arena has had top acts such as Underwood, Aldean, Shania Twain and, most recently, Florida Georgia Line — Fox says it’s a case of success begetting success.

“Jason Aldean and Florida-Georgia Line have the same agent, so based on the success of Jason Aldean last year, the conversation started — ‘Hey, when can we do Florida-Georgia Line?’” Fox said.

Also part of that is building relationships with agents and promoters, Fox said: “Just kind of staying on top of the agent and making sure he’s reminded of how well the last one did, and then you get rewarded down the road, because they know it’s going to be a win-win.”

Fox said one demographic that PPL Center has targeted is the Latino market, recently bringing in Latin rapper Pitbull, which drew an estimated 6,000 people, and bachatero Anthony Santos.

“We looked at all of those demographic data and realized that we had a piece that we were missing,” he said. “And so we tried to fill that. ... I’m not going to pretend that all of a sudden we’re going to be doing 10 of those shows a year, but we’ve found a nice little niche that I think we can probably count on trying to do at least one or two of those a year, and then it could grow from there.”

Fox said that the success of acts that appeal to younger audiences, such as Brand New and Twenty One Pilots, means PPL Center likely will look to do more of that.

Getting Trans Siberian Orchestra last year — “one that we’ve been working on since the first day that I got here,” he said — “can turn into an annual tradition and a perennial one that you can count on.”

Fox said his philosophy about concerts is “We’re always looking for more. In my opinion, there’s no number that is enough. That’s one of the things that we go through every single day and that’s my No. 1 responsibility, to fill this place.

“We’re always trying to do more. We feel like we have a good mix right now in family shows. We feel like we have a good mix in sporting events — even though we’re always looking to add more. But, I mean, from my perspective and from a general manager’s perspective, the saying goes, we’re afraid of the dark.’

“We don’t want to have any dark days. I’d love to do 365 nights a year. We know that’s not reality, but it’s ‘How many of those can you fill in?’ And filling them in with things that make sense.”