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NEWS & COLUMNS

Advancements in technology have always come at a cost, and clubbing is no exception, thanks to the Internet. Not so long ago, the typical nightclub experience was a simple and undemanding guilty pleasure. The guilt hasn't gone away, but like 8-track cassettes, such simplicity is now but a vague and nostalgic memory. Welcome to the shadowy world of online ticket sales, and the often inescapable service fees and convenience charges.

Many brave Davids are hurling stones at Goliath-like TicketMaster and Clear Channel. Remember Pearl Jam's heroic but ultimately futile attempt in 1994 to liberate itself and its fans from TicketMaster's monopolistic stranglehold during a highly publicized court action alleging antitrust violations?

No longer content with just bilking unsuspecting concertgoers, third-party ticket vendors like TicketWeb, WantTickets and BoxOfficeTickets, you now pay "service fees" on top of cover charges, including a \$1.25 "delivery fee" just for the privilege of printing your own ticket on your own paper at home. (TicketWeb, incidentally, a subsidiary of TicketMaster that primarily extorts fees from patrons of smaller venues; executives declined repeated requests for comment.)

Don't get me wrong: I love the fundamental concept of selling advance tickets online. It was once a reasonably priced courtesy to patrons. But now, "It's basically a scam," says Jerome Farley, veteran event producer and longtime manager of DJ/producer Junior Vasquez—a sentiment echoed by many others throughout the nightlife demi-monde. But given the escalating costs and logistical obstacles intrinsic to the modern-day ticketing process, which appears to be shifting almost exclusively towards online sales, third-party ticket vendors have become a necessary evil as most promoters and club owners simply can no longer afford to deal with all the associated hassles.

Betty Kang, president of Plexi PR & Marketing, has encountered her fair share of drama when it comes to online ticketing, but she believes the benefits outweigh the negatives. Citing a versatile Web site that's easy to use, prompt customer service and the ability to send promotional e-mail blasts to subscribers about upcoming parties, Kang has found WantTickets.com (which charges customers a \$4.25 service fee per ticket) to be an invaluable business partner.

OK, so maybe it isn't such a big deal to pay \$22.95 to hear,



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say, Chus & Ceballos spin at Crobar on a Saturday night. That was the price for a recent event for advance tickets purchased online at the club's Web site, which links to WantTickets.com. But why is the ticket price advertised as \$20 when you cannot even buy one at face value at the venue or anywhere else ahead of time?

Sure, it's still cheaper than paying \$30 at the door, and it guarantees entry if you arrive before 1 a.m.—that is, providing you even make it to the door, and some parties, while the exception, may not even sell tickets at the door. Plus, if you don't make it to the club, for whatever reason, or if the event is cancelled, you can kiss that money—service fees and all—goodbye.

These vendors aren't relying solely on the service fees you pay, either. They also get a flat fee from the venue or promoter for the initial set-up, reportedly ranging between \$500 and \$1,000. And on top of that, a pre-arranged commission on gross sales, generally between 2.75 to 4 percent. Add to that those preposterous home ticketing printing fees. Sorting out the sales tax obligations can be another nightmare, one that some club owners have attempted to exploit.

Are more impulsive revelers actually skipping certain parties because they didn't plan ahead? Are people showing up with an attitude because they're not really in the mood to party but didn't want to waste their pre-purchased ticket? Either way, the spontaneity and frivolity that once defined this recreational pastime have been somewhat diluted by the formality this new corporate structure demands.

So if you're tired of being held hostage by these service fee swindlers and their multi-billion dollar empires, what can you do? Look carefully for hidden fees and try to support only more honest and reputable ticket outlets. This will go a long way in helping to make our club experiences more economical and enjoyable, just like our forefathers intended.

Plenty of clubs and parties out there don't charge any cover at all, or collect only a modest fee at the door. The glitz and glamour of the megaclubs may be infectious, and it might sometimes even be worth paying the fees for the sheer delight of hearing your favorite DJ perform without having to worry about a protracted or uncertain admission. Hey, don't let those few extra bucks you might have to surrender at the door ruin your night. As long as you keep your spirit and soul in tact, that's all you really need to keep any good party pumping.

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