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‘Convenience’ can cost you at Lee’s entertainment sites

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Brian Barnes clicked RETURN and got a surprise.

The Fort Myers man wanted to see comedian Jeff Dunham at Germain Arena in Estero in March. The ticket cost \$45.50 on Ticketmaster’s Web site.

Then Barnes saw a \$2 “facility charge” and the \$11.15 “convenience charge.” And then he considered the extra \$10 he’d have to pay for parking.

Suddenly, his \$45.50 ticket was a \$68.65 ticket.

No way, Barnes thought.

And he quietly clicked out of the Web page.

“I didn’t want to pay that,” said Barnes, 58. “It’s so discouraging.”

Of course, anyone who attends area concerts and shows already knows about fees. They’ve been around for years.

What entertainment lovers probably don’t know is why they have to pay those fees in the first place. And where all that money goes.

“They don’t tell you what they are,” said Chris Vaile, 28, of Lehigh Acres. “They just give you a vague description.

“But what is it? And why am I being charged for this?”

There’s good reason to ask. Depending on the cost of the show and the quality of your seats, add-on fees can boost the price by up to 50 percent.

That gets steep.

“Who can afford to go out anywhere?” Vaile wondered.

Managers at area venues say they understand the frustration. But the fees are a necessary part of doing business.

Convenience fees (also called handling fees) pay for computers, computer servers and the employees to service and operate those computers. Not to mention postage, card stock and the other costs of printing and shipping tickets.

“It sort of adds up,” said Scott Saxon, general manager of the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall.

But the venues don’t want to penalize people who show up at the box office instead of buying tickets by phone or online. That’s why those people aren’t charged convenience fees.

“We don’t think it’s fair for people who come here (to the box office) to have to pay that,” Saxon said.

The Naples Philharmonic Center for the Arts charges a flat \$3 per ticket. Mann Hall charges \$5-\$6 (and \$10 for some big shows, such as the upcoming “Jersey Boys”).

At Germain Arena, you’ll pay \$4-\$11 in convenience charges. That’s because the arena uses Ticketmaster to handle its online and telephone orders. The company is known for its high convenience fees.

Ticketmaster officials didn’t respond to an interview request. In published interviews, however, company officials have said the fees pay for promoting the events and Ticketmaster’s huge network of employees and computers.

As for facility fees, these \$1-\$2 add-ons help pay for spotlights, theater seats and other replacements and upgrades.

Last summer, for example, Mann Hall bought three much-needed new spotlights.

“They cost \$45,000,” Saxon said and laughed. “That’s a lot of ticket stubs at one dollar a ticket.”

Most area venues don’t charge for parking. But Germain — like almost every arena in the country — does.

That’s largely because of the higher costs of running such a big facility and maintaining it as Lee County’s biggest storm shelter, said Sammy Wallace, the arena’s vice president of event programming. The same goes for its facility fees.

Those \$5-10 parking fees also pay for the extra cost of staffing events, Wallace said. The bigger the event — and the more people attending — the more staff and security are needed. So parking fees go up.

Ticketmaster and most venues aren’t secretive about these fees. They’re listed right there online under the basic ticket price, so you can easily appraise the situation and make a buying decision before entering your credit card number.

“We’re not trying to hide the fees or anything,” said Wallace. “They’re right there. It’s all transparent.”

Still, Barnes said he doesn’t buy all those justifications. He thinks some venues get greedy.

“I was born at night, but I wasn’t born last night,” he said.

Vaile echoes that. She particularly doesn’t believe Ticketmaster transactions really cost \$5-\$11 per ticket — regardless of the cost of card stock and computer servers.

“You’d think their servers would have been paid for a long time ago,” she said.

Of course, there’s a simple way to skip many of these fees: Just go to the box office and buy tickets there. Gone are the convenience fees and the processing fees.

That won’t work if you’re planning on seeing a show in Tampa or Miami. But for Mann Hall and Germain Arena, it’s just a short drive away.

“But, you know, for a lot of people that’s inconvenient,” said Saxon of Mann Hall. “Hence, convenience fees.”

That’s fine, but Vaile and Barnes wish all those extra fees would just be rolled into one flat ticket price. Sure, the bottom line might be the same, but at least there won’t be that uneasy feeling of a padded bill.

So why not switch to an “all-in ticket” (the industry’s name for one price, one ticket)?
Blame it on the bookkeeping.

It’s simpler to keep track of the money if everything is broken out into line items — that way, you can glance at the sales and see how much goes to the touring act, taxes, the facility, etc.

“It just makes it easier,” Saxon said.

Additional Facts

Area venues say fees are necessary to do business. Here’s where they say the money goes:

- Convenience and processing fees

These pay for computers, employees and costs of ticket orders over the phone and computer. Mann Hall usually charges \$6 for Internet and \$5 for telephone orders. The Phil charges \$3 for either. Mann also charges \$2 for Internet orders because it pays that amount to its software company (tickets.com).

- Facility fees

These go toward improvements and maintenance of chairs, lights and other necessities. Germain Arena says its \$1-2 facility fees help pay for the cost of maintaining big facility (7,100 to 8,300 people). Also, the arena pays massive amounts of sales taxes (which nonprofit venues such as the Phil don’t), and insurance and other costs of maintaining the county’s biggest storm shelter.

- Parking fees

Of the area’s three biggest venues, only Germain Arena charges parking fees. Parking is \$5 for most shows. For bigger concerts that can double to \$10.

- Sales tax/ticket add-ons

Some venues include tax in the basic ticket price. Mann Hall breaks out sales tax separately. Nonprofits don’t have to charge sales tax.

Ticketmaster charges \$2.50 to print your ticket at home, or \$3 to pick it up at a local Ticketmaster outlet. Standard mail doesn’t generate an additional charge, though.
