

The Internet and Worldcons

From Worldcon Runners' Guide

The Internet and Worldcons

The advent of the Internet into daily life has the potential of transforming how the Worldcon is run.

Some of the things that can be done include:

1. Register your con as an Internet domain name, e.g., http://www.cheekocon.org. That way, if you have to move your files to another internet server, all the mail and such will still get to you.
2. Set up an email address for queries ASAP—preferably when you win the bid.
3. Put up a web page with progress report contents, breaking news, preliminary program, etc.
4. Give each department a link off of the con's web page, so each department that is on the net can make changes on their own server and have them be instantly visible.
5. Set up an internal committee mailing list to discuss stuff.
6. Set up distribution lists for sending out breaking news.

Note: The following text is part of a working document by Chaz Boston Baden, intended to be a comprehensive discussion of webmastering a Worldcon. With Chaz's permission, the editor has excerpted a number of items of interest. Those interested in the progress of the full document can contact Chaz at hazel@dd-b.com.

The Magnitude of the Web Page

The obvious concern is that there be enough megabytes available to store the web page files, and any other ancillary related files on-line at the server. If you're using a shell account, this might include mail folders, or custom-built programs and scripts. The Design of your site will govern how much space you need for the web page files. And this can go far beyond just adding up how many kilobytes of text your PR's contain.

All special features take up space.

As a simple example, on the L.A.con III site — where we had megabytes to burn — just about each web page was presented *five times* in different ways.

There was the regular graphics-heavy page.

There was a modified version of the same page, suitable for stand-alone demonstration use.

There was the "mostly-text" version.

There was a true plain ASCII text version for the infobot to send out via e-mail.

And there was a macro source file that directly or indirectly generated the first four versions.

That's an obvious example. Less obvious, though, is the fact that each line of text or HTML takes up to 80 bytes (or more), per page. All images displayed, even the little ones, take up a line or two of HTML each use, to define where to find the image and how to display it, and there is the size of the graphic itself to consider.

Every image map takes another line or two of HTML over and above the bytes used to display the image. And if you have use "client-side" image maps, you have to include the entire definition of the map — figure about one line of HTML per target area in the image — every time it's used, plus everything else I've mentioned.

This can add up. Even a plain old ordinary link takes at least half a line of HTML to define the URL.

And any time you decide that something "has to be on every page" (such as an e-mail address, or even something invisibly buried like those "META" tags), you're multiplying its storage requirement by the number of pages where it appears.

Suppose you had 150 different pages, and there were three different HTML versions of each, and you decided to add 10 links to every page. If each link's HTML took 6 bytes, that would add up to a quarter of a megabyte right there! (I'm sure you won't *start out* with 150 pages, but then, we didn't start out with many either.)

Paying attention to issues like these can make the difference in your storage needs, and can postpone the day your site outgrows your storage quotas.

Keep it simple

You'll save time on your uploads, every visitor to your page will save time on their downloads, and you'll have a better chance of staying within your storage budget. And if you minimize how many different files (including images) need to load when each page loads, you'll also save on server log space. This could actually become an issue, by the way, L.A.con III's log files topped out at over 66MB for the last week before the convention, and that was certainly aggravated by the large number of images on so many of the pages.

If you're setting up your own server you'll need to deal with the log files. If you have a commercial ISP, the log files will be the sysadmin's concern and not yours. Speaking of ISP access logs, you have the dubious advantage of having a site that will, by its nature, build traffic gradually, and then start escalating and reach a mighty peak within a month or two — and then immediately crash to near-zero once the con's over.

By the time your ISP's management notices that one "individual" account is getting hits comparable to a commercial page (or, for that matter, a page with naughty pictures), the convention will be all over before they can contemplate taking any action (such as hinting that you should be paying for commercial -rate service).

(And we're really only talking about a thousand fans or so in one week's time — it shouldn't make an impact on a high-volume server anyway.)

I can't give you good numbers estimating what storage your web site will need, because there are so many variables. At a guess, I would say that you have a good chance of expanding to fill all the allowed space that you sign up for.

How Big?

For L.A.con III, we used several aspects of the Internet:

- E-mail
- Newsgroups
- World Wide Web
- FTP

The day of the FTP site, as with the day of the BBS, is in decline (although not gone forever.) But that's where the L.A.con III on-line presence started, in a file download directory on Netcom. One directory, a few files, more files as time went by.

Coupled with that was an e-mail server, so that anyone on-line could get information by e-mail, and, in time, a web page, so that anyone on the web could get the files via the world wide web.

This was at the heart of the L.A.con III on-line presence.

Things I Would Do Differently: With L.A.con III, the "file directory" eventually moved to our server, <http://lacon3.worldcon.org/>, and I set up a web-based interface. We also had a regular FTP directory on the same server, but it had only a subset of the regularly-available files. (In particular, it was set up to hold the Hotel Reservation Form.) If I do this again, the FTP directory will have all of the files available by e-mail! It should have taken a little more advance prep work is all. As Michael T. Pins points out: "for many of us who've been around for years, FTP is still the easiest, and more importantly, fastest, way to get files."

I started with a simply stated goal: that anything and everything the convention chooses to announce, would be available on-line – by e-mail and by other means (i.e. web).

Think about the implications of this for a moment.

Everything. All the Progress Reports, and everything in them. Stuff that missed getting into the PR's, that should have been in them. Stuff that's too specialized to be printed in the PRs. (Dealers Room rules, and fire department regulations, and art show instructions for artists)

Several fans were heard to remark that they always went to the web page for information and didn't read the PRs at all, because the web page had more information. That was easy — because what's in the PRs was always a subset of what's on-line. As soon as each PR came out (in practice, a week after the PRs started showing up in people's mailboxes), I received a plain ASCII text version of the PR, and I incorporated all of the info into the web page.

You might say it's all the fault of Brian Lucas.

Brian Lucas, at the University of Manitoba, was in charge of the 1994 Worldcon's Information department. As a side-project of that department, he started the first Worldcon Web Page for ConAdian. He didn't have it as easy as I did — once or twice he had to retype the whole PR to get it on-line.

But what he did is set up the site with different pages for different departments. At the minimum you could select a particular department, and he'd have the articles on that subject that had been printed in the PRs, in reverse order so you'd see the latest information first.

If I were to suggest one thing to the webmaster for a Worldcon — or any convention — it would be this:

Arrange your site so that the user can find what they need to know, by topic.

I agree that having the PRs on-line is important but it's more important to have the subjects indexed for ease of use. That's why on the L.A.con III site, each PR was just a plain ASCII text file. I didn't convert the PR to HMTL — that would have been precious time wasted. Instead I took each article in the PR, and converted that to HTML, and placed it in its proper place.

If you do that, and do that for everything that comes your way, you will have a useful web site.

In general I recommend treating your web site as a sort of superset or all-inclusive "never-ending Progress Report." There are some specific items, most of which will be published in or mailed with the PRs, that I recommend you make a particular effort to have readily available once they are released.

Something to try to plan for: will you be able to publicize a list of dealers with tables reserved? It benefits both sides — it shows what a wonderful, varied dealers room you'll have, and it works as advertising for the dealer. It also give you another opening for more "reciprocal links." A dealer who happens to have a web page can list what cons they're attending, with a link to your page, and you can link to their page in return.

I believe that anytime you can put up a list of "who will be at the convention" in any category, it works to your advantage. The web-crawling search-engine indexbots will index your page, and then when someone does a search of "Frank Kelly Freas" or "Jace Foss" your page will pop up. And that gives you one more chance of getting someone to make up their mind to attend the convention.

If you can get a list of artists exhibiting, put it online! If your Art Show Department is on the other side of the continent from you, try to line up some inside contacts in the department besides the director, who probably has enough to do with signing 'em all up.

The one document that more people want a look at as early as possible is the Pocket Program Schedule. When the complete convention schedule is finalized — at least, when it's set down in print and published — a copy should be put on-line.

When you do so, please make sure that this document or documents (you'll probably want to break it down by days, at least) are available via multiple channels. At a minimum, put it on the web site and also on an FTP site. If it can be made available via e-mail, do it.

If possible, put it on different servers to allow for redundancy in the case of server failure or network congestion. Publicize ahead of time where the Pocket Program schedules may be found. I would suggest `worldcon.org` as a backup site (write to `<a`

webmaster@worldcon.org ahead of time to make arrangements) and possibly other sites that seem appropriate.

When the Pocket Program is released, most of the online fans will leap to access it. L.A.con III's server went down that weekend, due to unrelated events, so fans were needlessly frustrated. We're just glad that service could be restored on Monday.

A plain ASCII text version should be offered. Other versions, such as HTML or PDF (portable document format, aka Adobe Acrobat format), are optional, but plain text is a must because everyone can read it.

PDF format allows you to publish an exact copy of the Pocket Program. This could also be handy for the Site Selection ballot, and the Artist Sign-Up Forms. I recommend investigating this. If you can enlist someone to do the necessary conversions, you'll find it effort well spent.

Incomplete Data: The hardest judgment call to make is when not to put incomplete lists online. For some departments, a list of "who or what's confirm so far" works well, with the list getting longer as time goes by. In the Programming Department, having a place to list Program Participants as their questionnaires come back is probably a good idea.

Putting a list of Program Ideas — that is, a list of various panel topics that may or may not get incorporated into the final program — is more problematical. So is putting up an incomplete schedule of events. We did both of these for L.A.con III, and I think I would do it differently given the chance.

The schedule: Early in the two-year life of the web page before the con, I put up pages for each day's tentative schedule, and as I learned the dates & times I slotted them in. For example, I knew that Opening Ceremonies would be on the first day, the Hugos on the 4th day, and Closing Ceremonies on the last day. Adding additional items as they were scheduled seemed like a good idea at the time, but probably was a mistake. At 4-6 months before the con, some of the "tracks" of events had been determined, but others had no representation at all in the (incomplete) day-to-day schedule. The schedule was clearly marked as being incomplete, but it still made the convention look like there wasn't going to be any panels because there was a whole bunch of non-panel events listed for each day.

I probably should have listed the event schedules for, say, Gaming, on just the Gaming page, and not incorporated them into the master day-by-day schedule until the *entire* schedule, i.e. the Pocket Program, was ready for release. This would have worked out fine because the Gaming events were listed in the Pocket Program anyway. If, when I received the Pocket Program schedule, I found that certain tracks weren't listed and I had received schedules for them separately, I could go ahead and merge them in.

Pocket Program Schedule Formatting: One fan suggested that it might be handy if the schedule was presented in such a way that it could easily be imported into a third-part scheduling program or spreadsheet. For example, if the date, time, room, panel name, participant, and description were consistently punctuated with a particular character to make it easier to parse, or if all the fields were enclosed in quotation marks and separated by commas.

This should not be your overriding concern when putting the schedule online. However, if doing so doesn't take a lot of extra time, it might turn out to be handy when you're putting it into HTML.

Some events, schedules, rooms or program tracks may warrant hot links from the schedule pages to other pages about the event. You also might decide to use some kind of icon to flag different types of events.

As far as the rough draft version (2-3 months out) of program ideas, before the program is finalized — I'd say if you get it, put it online, but be prepared to delete individual items on the instructions of the Programming head. And pull it off completely when the real, official, final list is released.

Everybody wants the program schedule.

This is what people asked about for **months** before the convention. (Even before the Programming Dept. had started sending out invitations.) And, of course, it's something that's not available until the very last minute. That's why it's printed at the last minute, after all.

Well, I wanted the program schedule too.

I got it in pieces. The "main program" was the biggest piece, and the last one to be finalized; the Gaming Program, Film Schedule, and so forth came a little earlier.

The problem that Craig Miller pointed out, is that publishing a partial program makes it look like the convention is only going to have a partial program. And segregating the parts only helps a little. We had one person e-mail us to tell us that he or she had scoured the entire web site (actually, it's easy to do as we had every page linked to each other via a "Next page" button) and found schedules for gaming and films but nothing on books... or something like that.

I'd really appreciate suggestions on ways to mitigate this, short of not putting anything on-line until it's all available — because if you go that route, it's harder to space out the work involved.

I'd also like to thank everyone who learned that it's best not tell me anything that I can't publicize, as there's nothing more frustrating to this publicist. And I apologize for exasperating them in return with "okay, then when **will** you be able to tell me?" I'm in the process of "breaking in" another chairman on the same principle... a good rule to use, I think, is to not publicize anything that's not sent to you in writing or e-mail. When I get something over the phone, I'll e-mail the person who called confirming that I can publish it.

Anyhow, eventually I got the program schedule, after the Pocket Program designer (J Shaun Lyon) had put it to bed. The first e-mailing had about one or two of the first items missing, but that was close enough! :) and a few days later it was complete. I didn't e-mail it to everybody, but I did put out a special announcement on the Infobot News announcing its availability by e-mail and on the web. (It's been pointed out that it ought to be available by FTP, too; I agree, and it was my mistake for not setting it up months previously, or specifically making the p.p. available via ftp at the time.)

(Also, the pocket program was temporarily offline due to a service outage — one of the reasons I previously mentioned for having backup servers in place well ahead of time.)

When I got the schedule, the first order of business was slapping it on the web site to make it available, and then over the next week or so I made it "pretty" and put in some icons to indicate which type of event it was. (It also helped me spot duplication, where I'd received a scheduled item early that was

duplicated in the master schedule.) This has been nominated as the best use of icons on an icon-heavy site, but let's not get back into the icons right now okay?

Finally, the program schedule — when it's available — is a nifty advertising tool. (Shame it's only good for at-the-door memberships. Although future Worldcons might refer back to "Here's what last year's Worldcon schedule looked like.") I had one person who called up wondering if his membership was money well spent, so I flipped to one page of the pocket program printout, and started reading off everything that happened or started or opened at 10:00 AM... and stopped when I got to the next time slot, saying "and that's just the 10 o'clock slot, it goes on for the rest of the day."

*"Not only does everybody want the schedule, but many people want it as early as possible. For example, for Glasgow, I was leaving two weeks early to spend some time in Edinburgh first, and I wanted to have a copy before leaving (it makes schedule meeting people a **lot** easier!)."*

*"I realize this is not always easy or even possible, but some lead time based on how "touristic" the site is would be appreciated. (*I know the schedule at that point isn't firm, but I'll concede that this is not universally apparent.)" (Evelyn C. Leeper)*

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(<http://www.noreascon.org/users/sfrovers/u1/wcrg/index.html>) | Table of Contents
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