Programming

From Worldcon Runners' Guide

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Programming

Contacting Program Participants

Finding program participants is in some ways the hardest part of the job. You get lots of people writing in, the problem is in balancing them, and finding the people who don't think of volunteering and of locating local people who would be valuable on your program.

You should coordinate with previous Worldcons to get information on participants (including feedback on how they worked out.) Large regional conventions are also an excellent source of lists of program participants, especially address information.

Main Track

Big problem: figuring out how large attendance will be at major program items. Which items get the BIG meeting room, which ones can fit in smaller meeting rooms?

It's a good idea to have breakout space nearby, so when a popular item adjourns, conversations can be carried on without interfering with the program item that is just starting.

Science Track

Local universities and research labs should be scoured for people who can speak on interesting topics relative to fandom. This requires a lot of homework on your part because most of these people do not know that the Worldcon or fandom exists.

Academic Track

An academic track has proven extremely useful. It enhances the value of the Worldcon in promoting "education" re IRS status, and provides an invaluable forum for academics who are caught in the "publish or perish" trap by giving them a prestigious forum to present papers in.

Trivia Bowl

The "Jeopardy" format has proven to be very popular. Regional conventions such as Wiscon already have Jeopardy equipment on hand that can be borrowed, rather than having to manufacture it from scratch.

TAFF/DUFF

The TAFF and DUFF winners should be given program space.

Theme Events

Theme events are a good way to show innovation in ideas, especially if they can be done inexpensively. Think of them as a good way to introduce fans to various aspects of fandom.

Participant's Questionnaire

Items to include:

- Name, address, phone number, email address
- Ask not only if willing to be moderator, but if experienced at it.
- Subjects the person is an authority on.

The program participant questionnaire should specifically ask the maximum number of items the individual wants to be on in a given day and the total maximum number of program items the individual would like to be on. This is a very, very individual preference. Some program participants are wonderful on many topics and really prefer to be on three to five panels a day. (Others are not so wonderful and would prefer to be on three to five panels a day — check with others who have been there!) Some program participants would like all of their program items to be on one day. Some want to be only on one item per day. Ask, and respect the responses. If you want/need something at variance with their stated preference, ask them if this is OK. (An email message or post-it note on their schedule seems to work fine — and you probably won't have time to write a real letter!)

Putting the actual program together

In recent years, the practice has arisen of doing the bulk of the program scheduling in one weekend-long session, usually held in mid- to late spring of the convention year.

Before doing this, make sure you have as large a pool of potential program participants as possible. You can do this by:

1. Sending out participant request forms to convention members who you think would make good participants.
2. Doing a mass mailing of participant questionnaires to SFWA and ASFA.
3. Placing notices in the convention progress reports.
4. Placing notices in SF news media (File:770, Locus, SF Chronicle)
5. Placing notices on the online media (CompuServe, Genie, AOL, Internet)

Also before the meeting, have your program software written and debugged (or obtained from one of the existing sources.) You do not want to be debugging software while running the meeting. The software should be easy to use by a novice with fifteen minutes of training, and include lots of "Are you SURE?" questions before dramatic operations that affect the database are executed.

In running the actual meeting, the following can be helpful:

1. Hold it at the convention facility if possible.
2. If you can't hold it at the convention facility, at least have a walkthrough beforehand, with copies of floor plans for all, so people can get an idea as to what rooms are useful for what.
3. Beforehand, compile a list of "boilerplate" stuff that is usually done (e.g., "If this is your first convention," "How to sell your first story," etc.)
4. Bring copies of many past programs from Worldcons and other large conventions, so "research" can be (ahem) properly done.
5. Do a mix of general sessions and small groups covering specific areas.
6. For the initial layouts, sticking post-it notes to a wall or bulletin boards usually works well. (If you do this, bring LOTS of post-it notes!)
7. Don't go more than an hour and a half without a break. You will often discover that the most productive work gets done during informal conversations at break time.
8. If possible, do meals outside of the facility rather than having them catered in. After hours of brainstorming, it gives people a change of pace, and a chance to stretch their legs.
9. Be sure to cater in lots of soft drinks (especially caffeinated ones), coffee, and tea.

   (You did allow for this in the programming budget, yes? Good.)

Once you've done the initial run (and before you do the final printout for the program), make sure:

1. A given person is not scheduled for more than one event simultaneously.

   (Yes, this happens more often than most cons would like to admit)

Make sure that you check not just for program items, but autograph sessions, readings, workshops, speeches, etc. If you just check for program item conflicts, you will definitely not catch all the conflicts!

2. A given person is not scheduled for several items in one day, unless they specifically request it. Example: don't schedule your guest of honor for five consecutive program items in one day.

   If you must do heavy back to back use of a guest, try to schedule the person for later items in the same room, or a room in the same corridor. Hint: scheduling a person for two panels simultaneously is one of the most efficient ways to have people laughing at the program staff.

3. For guests of honor and special guests, make sure they have activities scheduled throughout the con. Ideally, they should have one item each day, to give people an opportunity to meet them. You don't want to have your guests of honor being done with all their program items and such by Friday afternoon.
4. Make sure all participant preferences have been taken into account. E.g., orthodox Jews will often not want to participate in programming during the Jewish Sabbath (sundown Friday to sundown Saturday.) A person known as both author and artist may have a preference for the type of programming he is willing to participate in.
5. Avoid "horizontal tracking"—e.g., two panels on a given topic (say, the Internet) simultaneously. In programming, you want to give people a dazzling array of choices, you don't want them to agonize over multiple choices in their particular special interest. Note that this can be especially difficult if you are running a workshop track for developing new writers and/or artists—it's easy to accidentally put in main track items that would force agonizing conflicts.
6. If there is a program change be sure the change is posted at the original venue.
7. NEVER move a program item to an **earlier** time.

When actually scheduling timeslots, a practice that works out well if you have the time and space for it is to leave a half hour empty after each panel, and before the following panel begins. This allows time for people to clear out of the room and finish up conversations at leisure. If you don't have the luxury, then you need to have a policy of program items starting on the hour and ending at either 10 minutes or 5 minutes to the hour (and make sure this is known in the pocket program, and to all participants!)

After the initial draft of scheduling is complete, have half a dozen people do a sanity check. Then send **out the entire schedule** to the program participants and ask for their responses. (Often people want to see particular items which they are not on, and if you send only the schedule for that person, you'll have to deal with this at con instead of pre-con!) Either also include the person's schedule on separate sheets (with their co-panelists, if any, listed) or circle each person's items (and put the schedules in the correct envelope.)

Give them at least ten days to respond, but no more than two weeks (You don't want it added to their 'to do later' pile!)

Provide an email address and a phone number with an answering machine so that program participants can respond if they would like changes made to their own schedule. Consider including a SASP (self-addressed, stamped postcard) to encourage responses.

A week after the announced deadline you'll probably have most of the requests for changes. After making the necessary accommodations (sometimes this part is very hard), send the entire schedule out to the program participants again. Repeat the process above.

Program Schedule/Room Allocation:

Estimate the number of attendees. Then figure that about 1/3 of them will be attending their first Worldcon. These folks will spend 2 of their time going to the program, if there are items which sound interesting to them. About 1/3 of the attendees will be attending their second or third Worldcon. These folks will spend about 1/3 of their time in programming, if there are items which sound interesting to them. The remaining third will be made up of folks who are attending their fourth or more Worldcon and/or are committee/staff. These folks are likely to spend no more than 1/10 of their time going to programming. Add up these numbers and then review the programming space. Program for the likely number of attendees. Do not attempt to fill all the rooms all of the time!

One of the perpetual problems is the need to close down a program item when all the participants (panel and audience) are having a grand time. If another item is scheduled immediately following, there's not much choice.

If the number of rooms will allow this luxury, leave the program room vacant after program items which may want to continue. While having one continuation room is better than nothing, it is very disruptive to try to move a conversation. Much better if the same room can be used for the program item and for the continuation. (Make sure the moderator, the other panelists and the room monitor are aware the room will not be used during the following hour.) This is a far better use of space than having ten or twelve items at the same time that are poorly attended.

Program Operations

It is the job of program operations to actually administer the program. This includes:

1. Handling last-minute program changes.
2. Making sure the daily newsletter informs people of program changes.
3. Making sure rooms are set up properly (including appropriate audio-visual equipment being set up)
4. Warning panelists when there is 5 minutes to go, and when the program item is over (by having a staff member hold up a sign from the back of the room)
5. Generate name signs to be used by panelists.
6. Each morning, the first shift supervisor must send his top staff member around 1-2 hours before programming starts to make sure the function rooms are all set up properly. There will always be some rude surprises, and the earlier this is done, the more react time you have to get a hold of the facilities liaison or hotel staff and get the setup done right.

Program Operations Office

The program Ops office should include the following areas:

1. Reception area

   This is an area with tables or other obstacles to prevent casual passersby from walking into the room unchallenged. It should always be manned by people who are chosen for tact and politeness.

2. Computer area

The actual computer used to track programming goes here.

3. Desks for the head of program ops, and for the on-duty shift supervisor.
4. Bulletin board with Rogues Gallery of polaroid photos of Program Ops staff and key convention personnel (facilities liaison, etc.)

Supplies needed for Program Ops

1. Sign materials
2. Magic markers
3. Pens
4. Polaroid camera and film
5. Pushpins
6. 3x5 cards
7. Pagers for: head of program ops, program ops shift supervisor, head of green room, green room shift supervisor

Green Room

The Green Room is a lounge area where panelists are supposed to gather prior to their panel to meet one another and do any last minute preparation.

If at all possible, Green Room should be a separate room from where Program Ops is. At a minimum, it should contain at least as many round tables as there will be simultaneous program items, and an appropriate number of chairs. At the door there should be a check-in desk manned by a greeter to check badges so only program participants and their guests enter the room.

A supply of food and drink should be supplied. How lavish this is depends on the convention. At a minimum, coffee, tea, and a selection of soft drinks (Coke AND Pepsi, seltzer water) should be supplied; caffeine is important to panelists. Some light snacks should be provided (fruit trays, cheese and crackers, bagels in the morning.) The elaborateness of this is dependent partially on how much of this stuff the concom is allowed to bring in itself, and how much must be paid for at the confiscatory rates charged by the facilities banquet and catering department.

Some concoms have provided buffets with sandwich-making supplies, fruit, vegetables, and desserts sufficient for people to make an entire meal out of.

Another factor in the lavishness of the food and beverage supply is that the people passing through this room are the elite of the convention—the pros, the guests, big-name fans, etc. Their opinion of how well they were treated as panelists (which includes the generosity of the spread) will affect the PR that your convention eventually receives.

Half an hour before each set of panels, a sign should be set up on each table that indicates which panel this is. A manilla folder should be provided for the moderator, with a computer-generated label on the tab (so they can all be made up in advance) containing the topic/time/day of the panel. In the folder is a summary of information about the panel—what room it is in, what A/V equipment was requested (Slide Projector, Overhead Projector, Video Projector, 35mm Film Projector, tape player, Other), the moderator, panelists, and description of what is to be covered.

When it is time for the panel to start, a person from Program Ops escorts them to the room.

Tech

Tech's responsibilities vary from convention to convention, depending largely on the facility (is it union?) At some cons, tech runs movie projectors, etc.

Tech is a department that is sometimes shared between Program Ops and Special Events. In general, this is a bad idea. Program Ops needs its own tech crew to specialize in making setups happen.

Program Ops needs a small (four or five competent, trained people will do nicely) crew to take care of slide projectors, malfunction microphones, etc. These folks should not have other responsibilities for other areas.

If at all possible, tech crew should try to run sound rehearsals to determine whether a speaker or panel or video will produce a sound level which interferes with the proceedings in the next room. This is particularly necessary when one "room" is separated from the next by moveable partitions. It is absolutely essential when the "rooms" are created by "walls" which do not reach the ceiling, (Remember Intersection?) and create duelling panels!
