

WORLDCON RUNNERS GUIDE

GETTING STARTED

Although this is not a guide for bidding a Worldcon, the role of a Worldcon really starts before the win is ratified by the Business Meeting. Ground should be laid in the areas below.

Guests of Honor

Surprisingly, a Worldcon is not obligated to have guests of honor, or even to announce their names as of winning. At least one Worldcon has won without a slate of guests of honor, and named them later on.

It is traditional to NOT reveal the names of guests of honor before winning because it would be an insult to the guests of the losing bids.

It is also traditional that the guests should not have been Worldcon guests in the past (in the same category.) There are only so many Worldcons, older pros and fans are dying, and we want to honor as many worthy people as possible. To repeat a guest of honor implies that the Worldcon committee feels that all the people worthy of being honored in that category have already been honored; it also means another year goes by without a new person being honored for many years of service.

There are two exceptions:

1. A fan who was honored as a fan GoH who has since turned pro could now be honored as a professional GoH, and
2. A Toastmaster, which is considered a “working” position (albeit one of high visibility), may at a future convention be honored as a GoH.

A useful rule of thumb when selecting guests of honor is that the fan guests (of whatever stripe) should have been active in fandom for at least 20 years, and the pro guests should have been active for at least 30 years. (The difference in years is because those who turn pro have an incentive to stay active longer.)

The number of guests of honor is up to the individual Worldcon committee. It used to be that a professional guest and a fan guest were sufficient, but in recent years, Worldcons

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have added artist, editor and other guests. Many non-U.S. Worldcons tend to have separate slates of guests (a U.S. slate and a non-U.S. slate.) There is no one “best” recommendation here as to the mix of guests a Worldcon should have, other than the general precaution that the more guests you have, the more the honor is diluted, and the less that your convention can focus on honoring people who have given service to the field.

As you create your “short list,” consider the following:

1. Costs (hotel room, transportation, and food for each guest);
2. Theme, if any, for the entire Worldcon or just for Programming;
3. How the ‘mix’ of Guests of Honor will work together;
4. Is there any chance that the honoree will become the target of a feud because they have been so honored?
5. Health considerations of one or more of the GoHs;
6. The ease of working with the individuals;
7. Make sure you are honoring the individuals your core committee wants to honor; and
8. The diversity of the group you are honoring.

Mailing Address

Your convention should have a stable mailing address. These days that means a central email address. If possible, obtain a G-Suite account that will permit you to create many, many email addresses and hold all your documents.

You might also consider opening a post office box. If you do, however, do not open it in an area of town that is easily accessible only by the person who currently answers mail. That mailbox could be active for six or more years (including the bid and at least a year after the con), and the person who picks up the mail at the start of the bid may not keep the position for that length of time. The post office box should therefore be centrally located in your headquarters city or close to at least several members of the committee. Additionally, more than one person should have a key to the box. If only one person holds the key and then fails to check the box regularly, there is no way to double check and the incoming mail can bounce back to the sender due to a full mailbox.

Incorporation

Laws differ country to country, so the following is just a general rule of thumb, but oriented to the U.S.

Before you filed your bid, you should have at least started the incorporation process. It is important to be incorporated because if there is a problem with the Worldcon and someone sues (either for money or because someone was injured) the Board of Directors will be individually and personally liable, they can lose their homes and cars!

Usually, a corporation for a Worldcon is set up with a parent organization. This is not so much for the IRS as it is because once you have a working corporation that has passed state and IRS scrutiny, it is likely to have future uses beyond the Worldcon itself.

What you gain by incorporating is called a “corporate shield”. If someone sues, the most they can normally get is all your con’s office equipment. However, under certain circumstances, the corporate shield can be “pierced” and you can end up being personally liable again. These circumstances usually involve malfeasance or situations where it can be shown that the convention committee did not take “reasonable” measures to deal with a situation. You should retain an attorney with at least some experience in corporate law.

With no shareholders or salaries, it is more advantageous to incorporate as a not for profit entity (this is not the same as a federally registered nonprofit organization). Register your corporation in the state where the Worldcon will be held.

Once you have successfully incorporated your organization, it is time to apply for federal tax exempt status (for what is generally called a nonprofit corporation). A 501(c)(3) exemption is the gold standard since it will exempt you from most federal income taxes.

The IRS has tightened its rules in recent years, and Worldcon committees need to be careful and detailed in their application. A 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation is “organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, or educational purposes ...” Worldcons fall under the IRS rules for a private foundation as defined in 509(a)(2) – an organization receiving its income through a combination of donations, memberships, and merchandise sales.

In filling out a 501(c)(3) application, you will find it helpful to obtain copies of 501(c)(3) applications from previous Worldcons.

One area to pay particular attention to is the art show. This has often been questioned, largely because of the IRS’s history with people trying to set up non-profit organizations that do nothing but run art fairs (on beaches, in malls, etc.) A St. Louis group ran into this issue in the famous case where the Archon convention was denied a tax exemption.

Based on specific questions asked by the IRS of similar organizations in the past, we recommend some form of the following information be provided to the IRS either as part of the corporate by-laws or in the filing papers themselves (whichever is most appropriate):

1. Admission will be open to the public.
2. Emphasize the following:
 - a. the promotion of SF fantasy/literature and art (for that matter, arts in general);
 - b. Worldcon promotes the education of attendees and the general public. Top professional authors, artists, and scientists participate in panels, lectures, and workshops. Authors and artists are able to hone their skills in workshops.
 - c. The prestigious Hugo Awards are awarded at the convention, and note that no monies or remuneration are included in the awards.

Other items to note are:

1. The convention committee and staff are not paid, other than possible reimbursement of membership fees and reimbursement for reasonable and necessary authorized expenses.
2. Surplus funds, if any, will be used only for 501(c)(3) tax-exempt purposes. If you intend to participate in the tradition of pass-along-surplus funds, explain that.
3. Emphasize that there are no similar for-profit conventions. Describe media cons and how they differ (“show” versus “convention”), paid guests doing repeated presentations, heavy TV/media advertising, paid staff at upper levels, etc. Note that Worldcons (a) are memberships for the entire convention, and are not tickets; (b) offer a wider variety of programming and activities, (c) have a literary orientation, (d) do not pay for guests; (e) have a tradition of refunding memberships to most program participants, regardless of professional or “star” status, and (f) the accessibility of guests to the members.

There are probably other things, but these are the important items.

You will need to keep good and accurate records in case of an IRS Audit (which has occurred with some Worldcons). Avoid things like the con making loans to corporate officers (which should never occur).

Document expense reimbursements, and make sure they’re for things that are deductible. Issue any necessary and required 1099 forms.

Doing financially sound things (keeping books, balancing the checkbook, making decisions) that an outside observer would consider prudent and reasonable for a corporation) will help things to come out all right in running the gauntlet with the IRS, not to mention assist with the finances of the convention itself.

Board of Directors

Your convention will need a Board of Directors, or Executive Committee, or whatever you want to call it. The shape of this group will dramatically affect the shape of the convention.

Studies in military command and business organization have shown that the “ideal” reporting structure in an organization is to have no more than 9 entities reporting to any one individual (the ideal number is 7, plus or minus 2.) Boards of less than 7 tend to not have as much diversity of viewpoint; boards of significantly more than 9 tend to lose cohesion.

A key decision is how to map the divisions into the Board of Directors. Options include:

1. No divisions, just a bunch of departments, and a small Board of Directors consisting of friends of the chairperson.

This could be disastrous. Even if the chairperson is unemployed, they can pay only so much attention to things before they only start listening to the areas that are screaming loudest (and maybe not even those).

2. A Board that is independent of the divisions. Within this framework, either all divisions report to the board as a whole, or each Board member has one or two divisions that are that member’s particular responsibility.

This approach assumes you have highly experienced people with lots of wisdom, in addition to the people you need to manage the divisions. Not many cities have the luxury of that many people with that much experience. In practice, this system tends to deteriorate into the Board members acting as super-division managers, adding a superfluous layer of management and possibly earning the resentment of the appointed division managers, who find they have less power and responsibility than they thought they did.

3. A Board that sort of matches the divisions, with each Board member having a responsibility for a division, but not necessarily being in that division or being the division manager. This has been used when the division manager proper lives far away and can’t regularly make board meetings.

The problem here is that not all divisions will have the most eloquent spokespersons available. It also results in the possibility of a subordinate who is on the Board outranking his division manager.

4. The Board matches the divisions. There is one Board position for each division manager, plus the chairperson and vice-chairperson (if any). Corporate counsel and treasurer are not normally board positions, although they attend all board meetings.

Overall, this method seems to work best. However, there are three possible drawbacks that need to be considered:

- a. Each board member is tempted by the possibility of acting as an advocate for their division's benefit to the detriment of the convention as a whole.
- b. A person who is an excellent candidate as a particular division manager may be a very poor candidate for the Board because of a narrowness of vision. For example, a person who has only done film/video at cons is placed on the Board and has no idea of what art shows require and couldn't care less about them.
- c. If a power struggle ensues among the committee after the initial divisions are set in place, some parties may push for new divisions to be created. This desire may be in part motivated not by a need for organizational neatness, but by a desire to put another person on the board, thus shifting the balance of power.

From how far away should Board members be recruited? Here are pros and cons for various structures.

1. Local fans only, no non-locals need apply

Advantage: Easy to call meetings on short notice, Board members are probably already friends or have at least agreed to disagree on conflicting issues.

Disadvantage: The Board may suffer from extreme lack of experience.

2. Pick an arbitrary radius, say a day's drive (circa 400 miles)

Advantage: Increases available pool, yet allows for relatively frequent meetings without destroying travel budgets.

Disadvantage: If not in an area with surrounding fan communities, this may not be effective in increasing your base.

3. Recruit nationwide

Advantage: Recruit the best talent available.

Disadvantage: With the advent of good telecommunications, this is not as much of a disadvantage as it used to be. Videoconferencing has become relatively cheap and easy, but you will be dealing with people you may not know as well as you do your local fan crowd.

Regardless of whether meetings are in-person or via something like Zoom or GotoMeeting, effective meetings take preparation. Call for agenda items in advance and try to stick to them. Unplanned items can be discussed as well, as long as such time is factored into the length of the meeting, but they should be kept to a minimum and not be allowed to dominate the meeting.

The Chairperson

The chairperson's main job is to oversee the vision of the convention as a whole and to supervise the various fiefdoms that can spring up, nudging and pushing them to play nice and cooperate with each other. The chairperson is the primary voice of the convention and should attend at as many major conventions as possible during the course of planning for the Worldcon.

In general, no specific task should *ever* be assigned to the chairperson. The chairperson must keep track of the "big picture" and will not have time to do ancillary work. The chairperson's job is to listen to everyone and make decisions when problems arise – and they will.

Other responsibilities include:

1. Reading ALL publications issued by the convention. This includes material published on the website, ads, progress reports, flyers, program book, pocket program, etc. (Others can be assigned to pitch in as well.)

There is a chronic problem among publication staffs with not being able to spell and not using a spell checker. In addition, many fans are, blissfully unaware of the political implications of what they see as a humorous item for a progress report (when in reality its publication will start a feud).

The chairperson is the person who will take the blame when there are problems with a publication. If the chairperson is going to take the blame, they pay attention to insure that nothing too egregious goes out to the world. Likewise, the chairperson has veto power over web page content.

2. At many conventions, the chairperson has veto power over *all* committee appointments and has the power to fire anyone.

Note, however, that appointments at the department head level are made by the division managers, and appointments below the department head level are made by department heads, with the approval of the division manager.

The chairperson is *not* supposed to be recruiting people at the department head level or below. The chairperson's job is to find competent division managers/directors and let *them* do *their* job. If a person below the division head level is fired (regardless of by whom), the chairperson's job is not to go off recruiting someone else, but to delegate the recruitment to the appropriate department or division manager. If asked, the chairperson can offer advice or assist, but they should avoid micro-managing their department heads.

The chairperson's power here is a check and balance against a neophyte department head being falsely impressed by someone whose ego is larger than their ability to get the job done.