Behind the Convention Curtain: Programming

By Steven H Silver

If the Programming Team at a science fiction convention does its job properly, the end result should be a clean schedule that always presents interesting items for attendees and program participants alike. However, Programming is one of the most complex divisions of a convention and, to make the Programming Team's task even more difficult, it is an area that invites outside scrutiny at a time when the division is in a major state of flux.

When I first began attending science fiction conventions, I focused my attention on the programming. It was a way to see the authors whose books I had been reading for years and learning more about them. Also, since I didn't really know anyone, attending programming gave me a structure for the convention and allowed me to meet people who had similar interests. Eventually, I began to recognize non-authors who were participating in programming and discovered that many of them were as interesting, if not more so, than the authors whose names I recognized from books and magazines. When I began running conventions a decade later, I focused on helping set up the programs for those conventions, including the Worldcon in 2000. Although I've worked in a variety of areas, including publications, hotel liaising, ad sales, and chairing conventions, the area where I still have the most expertise and interest is putting together a program. After creating a program for a convention, I love the thrill of standing amidst the bustle of the con and realizing that people are running to get to wherever they are going, because I told them there would be something interesting for them in those rooms.

Programming interfaces with practically every other division, often in ways that are not obvious. The job begins in earnest with the announcement of the Guests of Honor. An experienced Programming Team will learn as much as possible about the guests by reading their books and blogs, listening to their music, looking at their artwork, and contacting them to find out more about them. The more detail Programming has, the more interesting, original, and varied the program can be. For instance, Mike Resnick has a passion for Broadway musicals which isn't necessarily evident by simply reading his books. However, knowledge of that interest, along with knowledge of other authors and fans with similar interests, inspired Chicon 7 to schedule a panel on fantasy in musicals. This research doesn't end with the Guests of Honor, but should be continued with as many program participants as possible.

In many cases, the core of the program participants will be known to the Programming Team before convention planning begins. They are the locals and regionals who attend every year. Not only should the members of the Programming Team know their interests, but they should also know who they can use as a sort of utility panelist to fill out numbers when a panel needs additional people, who tends to ramble, and whose sole purpose in attending is to hide behind a wall of their novels and promote their books. These last two participant-types do have their uses on programming, but should be used with caution.

Knowing why a person volunteers to be on programming can also be useful in figuring out how best to use them. If an author has a new book coming out, there is a good chance that book's topic will be their focus during the convention and programming can help them by creating related programming. Many scientists will be happy to talk about the latest hot topic if they are given enough warning to brush up on the literature before the convention. At its root, being on panels is about sharing your knowledge (and opinions) with the other attendees. For many, it also serves as a way of reaching out to their fans, promoting their latest works, and connecting with other people. Several years ago, Susan Shwartz wrote an excellent essay on that aspect from an author's point of view, "A Neo-Pro's Guide to Fandom and Con-dom," which I've reprinted several times, most recently in my 'zine, *Argentus Presents the Art of the Con*.[1] Originally published in 1990, it still provides excellent advice for anyone who is participating in panels at a convention.

I also work closely with Registration to ensure I know who will be attending a convention, so I can invite people to participate when it is appropriate. One year, I failed to do so and bumped into Ace editor Ginjer Buchanan in the hallway. I immediately invited her to participate in some appropriate panels where I felt she would be a good addition, but had I known she would be in attendance, I would have been able to build more programming around the editorial process and more fully use her (and possibly other program participants') strengths and publicize her participation. In order to create the strongest pool of participants, it is important to be aware of the writing scene beyond the current (or past) award winners. It is important to know that attendee Joseph Green wrote several short stories in the 1960s (and has worked for NASA since then) or that local author Wesley Chu's debut novel is about to be published. This allows you to continuously add to the program participant pool with fresh voices.

Although there is a pool of standard participants for each convention, a good Programming team is constantly on the lookout for new participants (and programming ideas). I was helping out at a booth at Chicago's Wizard World in 2004 when a chance conversation with the editor of this magazine led me to invite her to participate in programming at the 2005 Nebula Award Weekend. While reading a collection of essays on Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, I came across a philosophy professor at Notre Dame and invited him to attend and speak at a Windycon. I've also reached out to television, movie, and cultural critics at local newspapers, and scientists and curators at various museums. When inviting people who are not necessarily part of the con-going community, it is essential to explain our culture and set their expectations properly, and to understand that they might just not be interested.

Expectations should be set for all program participants, which means both the Programming Team and the participants need to know the terminology and policies of the convention. These often vary, although one standard is a distinction between a guest, for whom the convention pays their membership, and the vast majority of program participants, who often have to pay their own way. Some conventions offer a reimbursement when finances allow or a membership rollover but other conventions do not offer any financial compensation at all. Therefore, clarifying your convention's policy in this regard is important. Having participants who show up expecting to be comped and who then discover that they are expected to pay can lead to an awkward, and avoidable,

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[1] http://efanzines.com/Argentus/Argentus-SE2.pdf

exchange.

Of course, if you plan on attending a convention and are interested in being on programming, you should contact the team directly. When you do, don't just offer your services, but include a brief biography giving them the salient facts. It should be longer than "I've written many books," which I once received from a major award-winning author, and shorter than the full curriculum vitae with photos, press clippings, and articles I once received from a scientist. If the Programming Team is already aware of you, providing additional information doesn't do any harm, and if the team doesn't know who you are or is unfamiliar with your work or area of expertise, this will give the team a head start on the research discussed earlier. This is also a good time to suggest a panel topic or solo presentation you would be interested in, with the clear understanding that it may not fit the convention for that particular year.

Earlier, I mentioned that programming invites scrutiny at a time when it is in major flux. Sometime shortly before the convention, always later than programming participants, webmasters, social media, publications, and members want, the Programming Team will send out a preliminary schedule. The key to remember is that these schedules are preliminary. When I began running Programming, if a panelist was disappointed with their schedule or had a conflict, they would call, write, or e-mail me and I could work to fix it. Now, the disappointed panelist is just as likely to post their issues on Facebook, Twitter, or a blog, often without first letting Programming know there is an issue. Because this is a very busy time for the Programming team, the team is unlikely to stumble across the online complaint. It is also probably the worst way to handle the situation because merely mentioning it online doesn't provide an opportunity for Programming to fix the problem and essentially calls them incompetent in a public forum. Being human, if the Programming Team does learn about the posts, it makes them less likely to want to make the necessary changes, or even to use that particular individual on program in the future, although a good Programming Team can and will sublimate their own egos for the good of the convention.

As panelists confirm their attendance, it is time to interact with other divisions. When panelists, particularly authors, are added to the roster Programming will be using, the Programming Team should provide lists of names to the webmaster and the head of the Dealers' Room. Con members can then see who is attending and make plans accordingly, and autograph hounds can create the necessary pull lists, which is something I still do. Most importantly, early notice enables dealers to bring stock which is most likely to sell.

As the program comes together, the Programming Team will work with special events, which includes Opening and Closing Ceremonies, dances, if any, the Masquerade, and other large, frequently tech-heavy items to ensure space and personnel are available. They'll work with Logistics and Operations to ensure everything is where it needs to be when it needs to be there and with the hotel to make sure the rooms are all configured appropriately. And usually, at the last possible moment, they will present the program descriptions to the Publications Team for incorporation into the souvenir book and pocket program.

A good program helps set the tone for the convention. It can draw people together and lead to conversations in the con suite, sales in the dealers' room, and even new

friendships. A very good program can introduce people to new aspects of fandom and break down the walls we erect for ourselves when we only attend literary or costuming or filk or media or gaming programming. Even people who have no interest in programming panels are affected by a good program because it will entice fans, authors, artists, editors, and other people who add to the convention when they aren't on panels.

In the end, the program continues to change even after the souvenir book is published and the schedule grids have been printed. No convention schedule is truly complete until after Closing Ceremonies when everyone goes home. And the Programming Team, whether with the same personnel or not, begins planning for the next year's convention.