

So You Want to Host a Convention...

By Brad Slone

As the reality of winning the bid to host the 2015 regional convention set in, it occurred to me that I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. I was reminded of a scene in the Star Wars movie where Luke Skywalker says he is not afraid and Yoda replies “you will be”, I was kind of in the same boat, I didn’t even know enough yet to be scared! I thought there was surely somewhere I could go for some historical data or guidance on how to proceed, but what I found was limited at best. The region handbook does have a section on the breakdown of the convention committee, which is a great reference when you are drawing from a large pool of volunteers, but in our case this was not the situation at all so I was basically starting from square one.

Two years later in the days following the convention I recalled how much I had to learn as I went along and thought it might be beneficial to those organizing conventions in the future to have something to look at so they could benefit from my successes and to learn from my mistakes. As I share my thoughts, I will try to give you good information that you can use, but I will interject a little humor and opinion, as once your term is complete, you will understand. To put it in some context, in the days following our convention I made myself set down and jot down these mental notes before I forgot them. It was about five months after I wrote down the last one before I felt like getting back to them. Point being once you get finished with the convention, you will want a break before you will even dream about wanting to have anything else to do with it. All my thoughts and ideas may not necessarily line up with lock and step with NMRA protocol, however they for the most part worked for us. If you don’t agree with the views I discuss, find what works for you. There is no “one size fits all” template to use, this is simply pointing out things I learned along the way. I hope you find it helpful and maybe even a little humorous.

You are not going to please everyone, let’s get that out in the open right from the start, so just get ready. Just be prepared to deal with problems and individuals in as calm and interested manner as you can. If the problem merits action, then take care of it if it is within your means. Learn quickly to walk the political mine field and grow thick skin because it’s going to happen. Believe it or not, in our convention there were some local members of the region that for reasons I’m still unclear of were not happy that the convention was being held in their town, (seems odd doesn’t it). It is very hard to understand what circumstances that might have brought them to these conclusions, but the best advice I can give is to do your best initially to heal these old wounds and if it appears as though you are not having any success, move on. In my particular case, I expressed how much we would appreciate their involvement, but that we would respect their decision and not trouble them anymore. You cannot allow the success or failure of your convention to hang on the attitudes of one or two disenchanting members.

Visit all venues personally and evaluate them on how well it will meet the needs of the convention. I would also comment that the cheapest hotel is not necessarily the best choice. A very nice venue may or may not be remembered, but a poor one most certainly will and not in the way you want! It should go without saying, study your hotel contract closely and negotiate hard to reduce the number of room nights you are required to fill. You might be able to get the hotel to eliminate them all together, but that is doubtful. There was a regional convention held in Topeka, Kansas a number of years ago where the committee committed to filling a large block of rooms and was unable to fulfill their obligations causing the convention to go into the red and costing the region a sizable amount of money, so be very careful not to fall into this situation.

Often there are less obvious charges within the hotel contract. I won't go so far as to say they are hidden, but they certainly are not oblivious. Scrutinize your proposals closely to look for these. A few that I have encountered include a city service tax that can be quite excessive, another is a charge for electric to each vendor that requires it. Audio-visual support from the hotel can be very pricy as well, it is not uncommon to be charged for things as simple as a screen, so be prepared for these. There are a number of projectors available throughout the region - makes some phone call and arrange to use these. One way that we were able to trim some expense was by repurposing the contest room for the banquet on Saturday. By doing this we were able to eliminate a room charge all together (the down side is that your contest staff needs to be aware of this early on and to be prepared to vacate the room typically by mid-day – in addition, be sure that the timetable correctly reflects reality – there was a convention in St. Louis, MO where the timetable did not represent the contest cutoff time correctly and this led to some very hard feelings). Another way to grease the negotiating wheels is to agree to have the banquet and meal at the venue. By doing this it will often put you in a better negotiating position for the rest of the terms of the contract.

Be careful when setting up service contracts, particularly when it comes to the issue of deposits. There have been countless conventions and events both national and regional that have had their budgets decimated because a bus line, caterer, or even a venue has went out of business at the last minute taking your deposit money with them. Unfortunately this one can be very difficult to see coming, so the only advice I can give is not to write the check any sooner than you have to and do your homework on the company before hand to weed out the fly-by-nighters. Early on in the planning of our convention we were looking at the possibility of chartering a local diner train for one of the evening meals. Planning had progressed to the point in which we had agreed to a date, pricing minimum head count etc. We had even received a handful of registrants that had paid for this extra fare event. About four months out from the convention the company ceased operations and was not returning calls. This is why I recommend holding off as long as you can on sending deposit checks.

In terms of a webpage, first off I would say avoid the temptation to get it up and running too early. This is not justification to procrastinate! In the digital age, folks get tired of going to a webpage and not seeing any change within a reasonable amount of time! If you get it up too soon you are not going to have a steady stream of information to regularly update it and it gets stale. You want folks coming back to it

on a regular basis to be advised on the latest information. Keep it visual, colorful and interesting (but you don't have to be a graphic designer or a paid page builder). I put together the page for our convention (with the help of my wife) and it was the first time I had ever done such a thing and I had a lot of compliments on it. Once it is up and running the biggest thing in my opinion is to keep it fresh and update regularly.

It will be a red letter day the first registration you receive in the mail, to know that you are beginning to recoup some of the money that you are on the line for is always a good feeling. I would recommend getting the forms out there as soon as the list of events is firm enough that it won't create a lot of work for you down the road. In our case, we were fortunate in that as deposit deadlines approached we had enough funds in the bank to cover them without having to go to the region for a loan. This also offers a greater range in flexibility in the decision making process. You will also have to decide how you want to deal with taking registrations from non NMRA members. There are strong arguments for both views. If they have never been a member before than a simple and cheap suggestion is the NMRA rail pass program. If they have at one time or another been members then they are no longer eligible. There has been a great deal written on the subject and discussion at length at the national level. All I will say on the subject is that if you are running on a tight budget, you want all the revenue you can get.

While on the subject of registrations I would like to touch on the topic clinicians and home layout owners with regards to registration fees. Historically there is no real precedence on charging clinicians full fare when making registrations. There has been a lot of discussion on the topic at various national events over the years and a fair amount of hard feelings on the topic depending on what decision was made. It was our consensus that if you were giving up your time and spending money to travel and stay that you should not be asked to pay for registration as well. We felt like a complimentary registration was a nice gesture to offer those who were donating a fair amount already. This was a bit of a risky position to take early on when the distance to the break even line is so far away, but none the less it was the direction we chose. That is not to say that the whole convention was given to them, they still had to pay for any extra fee events that were held, just not the general registration fee. Early on one of our goals was to provide a convention packed with fresh first rate clinicians, and one compliment that I heard repeatedly during and after the convention is that we did just that. I feel like this perhaps was one small perk that helped us get a number of clinicians to jump on board.

Have backups of your records! For example, while the registrations were entered into a computer spreadsheet the hard copies were retained for those "just in case" moments. This was also beneficial when folks showed up to register to deal with any conflicts. But the primary reason to keep copies is insurance against a computer crash. While planning our convention I did suffer such an event and while it did not set me back significantly such a situation at the wrong time could be very difficult to overcome. It's also a good idea to have the registrant's hard copy on hand at the registration booth just in case there are some discrepancies, it will help prevent some misunderstandings.

When shopping for a keynote speaker to headline your banquet or some top tier folks to give clinics bear in mind they don't come cheap. Your better option might be to stay with folks within the industry, for example editors of various hobby magazines are a good choice, because typically they won't charge you. This is because they are able to use it as a business expense, plus it gives them an opportunity to meet the folks that enjoy their products. Start beating the bushes for prospective speakers as early as possible. These folks are typically inundated with requests to show up at venues and those that ask first typically get first choice. If you do have to pony up a little extra to get your speaker of choice try to steer it a direction that helps the convention. For example, as discussed earlier it is difficult to get a venue to forgo the room night stipulation so if need be, offer to pay for the speakers room. This will get you closer to your requirements and again going back to your venue contract, some will offer a complimentary room or reduced rates if you meet their number requirements. This would also be a way of attracting speakers without incurring any direct expenses to the convention budget.

As far as clinicians go I would recommend that you focus a lot of effort in this area. I can't tell you how many comments I received from our convention on how strong our lineup of clinicians was and how that was the deciding factor on why they came. If you have funds available, you can pay for some if you think it is worthwhile, but we were able to secure our clinicians from throughout the region. Some of our clinicians were not NMRA members and this could cause some grief within the right circles. But I can't tell you how many conventions I have gone too that had virtually the same line up as the year before. If you are able to go outside the normal pool you are more likely to get fresh material and that will have an impact on your attendance. It's not bad to have a few folks with some of their standard clinics on hand, so that, if a clinician does not show up, you have a backup plan in place.

Be mindful not to fill the clinics with all the same subject matter, while this may seem obvious, you would be surprised at how many conventions there are where there is very little difference in the topics. I would suggest the following subjects as a starter: prototype, modeling (to include all type cars motive power, structures, etc., layout planning), technology (with all the advances today this is a big one, we had 3d printing and dead rail just to name a couple), operations, historical, and scenery. Note: I'm not saying that having several clinics on the same topic is a problem, just be sure and have plenty of variety.

Make a contact list of clinicians (and any other key folks) for that matter, including cell phone numbers if possible. Contact them at a minimum of one week out to confirm they will be there on the time slot scheduled. It might not hurt to touch base with them again a few days out. Don't just send an email and call it good, emails can be ignored (we've all done it) - a phone call in these situations is much more effective. Most of the points that I mention come from situations that we encountered along the way, this one is no different. The day of the convention we had one clinician that was nowhere to be found. When he was reached by cell phone he thought it was the following week, making for a difficult situation. On that same note, stay in close contact with your busing company should your event require one. Nothing makes your convention goers more nervous or leaves a lasting impression than waiting indefinitely for a bus. One humorous story I will share on that note,

at our convention while folks were waiting on our tour bus to arrive a school bus happened to drive up completely by coincidence. Needless to say it raised some discussion from the attendees, while it provided several chuckles from those of us who knew better!

I mentioned in the previous paragraph making a contact list for the clinicians, I would expand this to include vendors as well as point of contact information for the offsite tours as well and if possible touching base with them in the days leading up to the convention as well. You will be surprised, but you might find one or two that “thought it was the next weekend”. When it comes to vendors, I found you had to work the phones pretty hard to get folks to come out. I also found that there was little point of contact information retained from one convention to the next, to resolve this I have compiled a list of vendors that have attended recent conventions as well as larger train shows within the region. I would like to see this list amended by each year’s convention so that it can be pasted on to the next year’s convention. Don’t make the mistake of overbilling your event! You might be thinking “isn’t this exactly what I want to do?” Yes it is, when you are marketing your event to the attending public, but if you tell your vendors you expect a thousand registrants and you only end up with a hundred, it’s kind of like Ricky always said, “Lucy, you’ve got some explaining to do!” Often these vendors have little room for profit after they have paid for the expense of coming to your show, be as forth right as you can to them with what you expect and then leave the decision to them, you will be far better off in the end.

When looking over prospective venue keep in mind how easy or difficult it will be for vendors to setup. Some need little more than a path while others might need a full blown loading dock. Also be prepared that many will want to setup late the evening before the convention starts, often lasting late into the night. Our convention started with an opening meet and great clinic on Thursday evening with the train show opening the following day. My Thursday began at about 7am that morning and I didn’t get to bed till about 2am Friday morning, so be ready! Many times particularly with large vendors they will need some assistances loading and unloading - you may or may not be willing to offer assistance, but sometimes offering this help will be a deciding factor in whether or not they will attend.

While many areas and divisions have a large pool of members to draw from we did not. I realize that my next suggestion could draw fire from some of our NMRA officials, but if you are short handed don’t be afraid to draw from help outside the organization. For our convention this was our only option, you might be able to get help from a volunteer youth organization, but you’ll need to be prepared to pay for this help. Again maybe this will ruffle the feathers of some folks, but in our case we had no other choice. In some instances you need to be prepared to feed your help as well - one case that comes to mind is the first evening of registrations. It is not uncommon for attendees to show up late that evening, so order your help some food so they will be able to stay put and get people registered.

Layout tours are also a big part of any convention, and the attendees will remember them long after the convention is over. If your area is short on layouts you might not be able to pick and choose. This can be a difficult proposition as a layout owner could easily be deeply offended by not being allowed to participate. Someone from the convention committee should go out and visit each layout to assess and gather

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information to be published in the convention handouts. While previewing the layouts, you should also check to see if GPS gives proper directions for each location. Most folks these days rely on GPS to navigate them to locations, but there are still some that favor printed directions - so you will need to prepare these for the convention timetables as well. Be as clear as you can be in describing the layouts in the timetables. Some folks might not be interested in a three-rail layout for example, so don't describe a layout as something it is not. If you send a number of folks out to a misrepresented layout, you **will** hear about it.

A couple things that might go overlooked until the last minute is advertising and publishing. Get in touch with as much media as possible, local newspapers are good, TV stations are even better if you can get their attention. Don't forget to get your dates out to every trade magazine you can well in advance. Most every magazine has some kind of coming events section - this is cheap advertisement, use it to its fullest. Don't overlook internet magazines as well as other historical websites, region websites, and their publications all can be great sources to get the word out. On the subject of advertisement we were approached by a hobby publication to purchase advertisement, we weighed the pros and cons for a considerable amount of time. In the end we decided that for the coverage we would received we would not get enough return on the expense. That was our conclusion - I would say that it needs to be considered on a case by case basis to determine if there is enough value to justify.

Don't put off assembling the timetables to the last minute as there is a fair amount of labor involved, so be sure and give yourself and the printer plenty of time. That being said, unfortunately they will have to be one of the last things you do in terms of pre event stuff because all of the information going into them has to be finalized. Although I don't necessarily agree on the need, we had a request for a "notes" page within the timetable. I would say use your own judgment on this one. This will be a page that you will be paying for when printing the timetables, so you have to decide if it is worth the money that it costs. We were able to have ours printed through a small local printer that provided the layout work as well. Although out sourcing this feature of work did increase the expense, it was not that pricy and the results were much more professional in appearance.

When setting up name tags, be mindful of your name spellings - you would be amazed how upset this makes some people. Include the MMR prefix if applicable. We were able to use the same printing company that printed our timetables as they were able to make a name tag similar to the laminated tags used in concert venues. The tags were very nice, inexpensive and included lanyards, on the back we had printed each event the registrant had paid for. One additional benefit to have the tags premade is that barring any printing issues it is one less thing to deal with during the show. The only problem here is that it takes a great deal of coordination between you and your registration records and the printer and the process is not very user-friendly when there are last minute changes. The best solution to this we found was to have several blank non laminated tags made so that we could make name tags at the registration booth. Not exactly ideal, but more incentive for folks to pre-register. In conjunction with properly staffing the registration booth, you also need to be prepared to equip it to the same extent as you

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would a small office. This should include a computer with printing capabilities. You will need to have channels of communication in place between coordinators and the staff and the booth so they can convey updated information to the convention goers. Dry erase boards work well for communicating new or changing information to the attendees and can quickly be updated.

On the subject of communications, you can not be in every place at once, so line up help early on that you can trust to deal with the tasks you layout for them on their own. Learn to text as well (I know, I know, I never liked it either, swore I wouldn't do it, but during a convention, as much as you may want too, most of the time you don't have time for lengthy conversations). The ability to quietly, discretely, quickly and to the point communicate to various members of the staff is tremendously important. Despite all the best planning in the world, you will be amazed at how many issues come out of nowhere that have to be dealt with on the fly.

Be prepared for the morning of initial setup - you might think things will be slow that first morning, however the pace picks up very quickly as the morning progresses, so don't be caught off guard and find yourself understaffed. You do need to have vendor table layouts planned in advance. There are two schools of thought regarding assigned tables or letting the vendors choose their own. Either way you will need folks there to maintain order and prevent having a bunch of empty single tables. It varies from place to place, but often the local Fire Marshall has to review table layouts to maintain paths of egress, one other item to mention and again, rules vary with each municipality, but some will require sales tax to be paid.

As mentioned before in the discussions about the hotel, we found multi purposing the contest room as the banquet room to be a cost saving well worth the additional planning. The contest staff need to be completely aware of this (preferably prior to the convention) so that they can be prepared, as typically they are accustomed to having use of the room for the whole weekend. Even though the region's contest chair will usually manage the contest room, he or she will need staffing help as he or she shouldn't be expected to keep an eye on the room throughout the entire convention. Also worth mentioning is security, this goes for both the contest room as well as the train show room. For obvious reasons you must be able to secure both rooms, normally the contest room can be locked up fairly early in the evenings. However it is not unusual for vendors to come and go preparing for the next day throughout the evening.

Door prizes is another one of those take it or leave it subjects, that in my mind is not worth the aggravation particularly if you are short-staffed. It takes a good deal of effort in the days before a convention to contact various manufactures and ask for donations and then a fair amount of logistical effort to gather, store and then transport to the show. In addition to this it takes time away from your registration staff to draw, post and dispense the prizes. Sure, everyone enjoys receiving a door prize, but in my opinion if the absence of door prizes is the deciding factor on whether or not an individual will attend, they were not very serious about coming in the first place.

Have a good IT staff in place - one of the biggest re-occurring problems was setting up each clinician's power point, their associated files and sometimes their computer. Check your computers and projectors to make sure that they all talk to each other, and check with your clinicians to see if they are bringing their own computers and (if so) that they will have the proper projector connectors (for example, if they are using mac products they can connect to the projector!) If you plan on running three clinics with audio visual requirements at the same time don't just have three projectors. Always have a fourth projector on standby in the event that one goes down, for that matter a backup laptop wouldn't hurt either. Don't let audio visual issues surprise you at the banquet either. Often unless specifically called out, the hotel will not include them in your package. If you catch it during the negotiation phase they will more often than not throw it in. But if over-looked you can expect that they will charge you for its use.

Make friends early in your convention setup with the hotel staff. This may seem like an odd thing to bring up, but you would be surprised how treating the hotel staff with courtesy and respect can be beneficial. We were able to work through a number of minor issues that had they went through normal channels would have increased the expense of the convention. However by having these connections a number of these issues, audio visual, IT, catering simply became a non-issue.

We had one incident at our train show that took us completely by surprise, we had a twelve year old boy try to shop lift an item from a vendor. I will not go into the exact details, as most of the times each instance is unique. But I would suggest that you have some semblance of a plan and it is discussed with your train show and registration staff. If at all possible and this is important, let the hotel staff deal with the individual and/or parents and not any of your personnel. In amongst everything else you will have to deal with as a convention chair the last thing you need is a suit filed against you (or worse) charges. Let the hotel take the responsibility, it is their premises and it is what you are paying them for whether they like it or not.

Have an agenda for the banquet, not necessarily for the attendees but for yourself so that you are not trying to keep it straight as you go and therefore risk forgetting something. It also goes without saying to make place settings for the folks setting at the reserve table. I would also say make notes for yourself if you are going to do any of the speaking. Typically in the past when speaking I have preferred not to do this, as I have been more impromptu in my speaking. However I quickly realized how easy it is to over look and forget aspects that you want to discuss. I wouldn't say write everything out, but if nothing else have an outline.

In closing, I would say despite all the work leading up to it enjoy each and every moment. A high ranking former national officer once told me the best convention you will ever attend will be the one following the convention you just put on - you will be able to appreciate the efforts of your successor running around putting out fires! I would compare it to a place we have all been at one point or another, your favorite train watching spot. You've watched the signals and you know a train is coming, but still you wait and wait. Finally you begin to hear the roar of

the engine and pretty soon you see a headlight round the corner some distance away. Next thing you know the train is on top of you with a rush of wind & dust and the thunder of noise. As the engines pass, the noise subsides, as the cars steadily pass fly by. With that, all at once the fred or caboose (preferred) has disappeared around the corner and all you are left with is standing in the bushes with the smell of creosote, mosquitoes and memories!