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"A Con-Running Metaphor"

The
Art
of the
Con

Expanding your Program Participant Base

Steven H Silver

When it comes time to figure out program participants, the first ones on the list for any given year are the con's guests of honor. Not only should the programming chair use these people on panels, but panels should be designed with their work (written, artist, film, or other) in mind. Even better is to find out their interests and program accordingly. Most people can be used in ways not obvious if you only look at what they are best known for.

Does your author guest of honor paint? Sing? Work as an active scientist, folklorist, photographer? Find out and use them in those areas. It will make the con more interesting for the guest and introduce their fans to a different, more human, aspect of them. Hal Clement, for instance, could speak about his novels, teaching science in the classroom, or his experience in World War II. If Programming needed it, Hal could present his "George Richard" persona as an artist and discuss his painting and illustrations. Most guests, no matter how they are billed, have the ability to be a sort of Renaissance guest, but in many cases, the title pasted on them...Author...Artist...Media...blinds and limits the Programming team from using them as effectively and as innovatively as possible.

Following the guests of honor, there are guests and special guests, local fans, authors, artists, etc. who can be relied upon, and other individuals who contact Programming (or through the office of guest liaison). As the Programming staff gets to know these individuals on a more personal basis following several years of attendance, the staff should have a better idea of each of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their varied interests to use them to expand the program and fill in gaps as needed.

However, there are abundant sources for additional program participants out there: people who can be contacted

who might not otherwise come to the convention, but can add a great deal of value to the program, often for the simple price of a comped day membership.

I've brought in specialist panelists from the local newspapers. After noticing one of the local paper's television reviewers give several good reviews of SF television shows, I dropped her an e-mail asking her to attend. She (and her husband) did and had a great time and hope to come back. Looking through the paper, there are other possibilities as well: the cultural critic, film critics, the book review editor (although our local book review editor detests SF and won't review it, which makes me want to bring her to a con even more).

Radio personalities are also a possibility. In Chicago, Peter Sagal, of "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me" is an avowed science fiction fan. We won't know if he'll come to a con until we ask him. Another NPR commentator, Aaron Freeman, did come to a Windycon several years ago. A couple months later, I got a call from him and he read one of his commentaries, about the con, to me about a week before it was broadcast on NPR.

Museums, especially, but not limited to, science museums, are also a good place to look. Scientists can come to talk about their specialties, curators about preservation techniques, if you have an art museum see if there is any reasonable tie (again, many pulp SF artists actually studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago). Contact their community outreach departments to see who is available.

Universities have a plethora of specialists, many of whom will be willing to come out and talk about their areas of specialty, whether it be science, history, philosophy, art...Check their credentials. A few years ago, I noticed a philosopher from a

university about three hours away had written an article about *Firefly*. We had him at the con.

Numerous fans work in the technology industry and know people at their offices or companies who are doing research that could possibly be shared. Reach out to them. Not only might they be willing to come and talk, but, given the type of work they do, they might easily be able to make the transition to fan.

Many cities have other, more miscellaneous organizations, that could offer good panelists. In most large cities, you'll be able to find someone (or sometimes, multiple someones) who offer tours of the haunted spots in the city. They can't really give a tour during the con, but they can tell stories and distribute literature about their offerings.

About three months before the convention, send an e-mail, call, or send a letter to the individuals you want to invite. Remember, they most likely aren't part of the con-attending community and will have preconceptions about what to expect. Explain a little about your con. Tell them why you think they would be a good addition, including specific program items you would like to put them on, or topics you would like them to speak about. Let them know what you are willing to offer...a one day membership for them, for them and a guest, the whole weekend?

If you don't get a response, follow up, but don't make a pest of yourself. If they don't respond after a second invitation, give it up and possibly try again the following year.

And if they do accept, treat them as a guest of honor from Programming's point of view. Let them know

expectations, where to pick up badges, materials, etc. Keep in touch with them and let them know what their schedule is. Don't schedule them for anything without their approval. And contact them about a week before the event with a reminder, their schedule, and to ask if there is anything else they need.

With luck, they'll not only add a new dimension to the convention, but will enjoy themselves so much that they'll come back on their own dime and can be inserted into the regular programming participant pool.



make a better and memorable panel. That said, don't disagree just for the sake of disagreeing.

- VIII. Also, do not insult people—other panelists, the audience, the committee....
- IX. Do not drag the program item off-topic.
- X. Do not call on people in the audience for questions if you're not the moderator—corollary: in fact (unless you are the moderator OR the moderator isn't doing the job) don't moderate.
- XI. Do not add other people to the program item, or allow people to add themselves to it.



Programming—First Principles

Mary Kay Kare

Steven talked to me about doing an article on programming, but the topic is too huge and sprawling to take on. You could write a book about it, let alone a fanzine article. There are, however, a couple of things I would like to talk about – call them basic principles on which to build your programming.

1. What is your convention's mission statement? It may be explicit or implicit, but most conventions will have something they're aiming at. Keep that mission in mind as you build your programming and ask yourself, "How does this contribute to our mission?" Of course, since this is probably not a for-profit

venture we're talking about, not everything has to be directed to fulfilling this, but you'll have a better-organized, more coherent program if you keep it in mind.

2. Our guests of honor are here to be honored. Ask them what they've always wanted to do on programming and never got to do. Devote a substantial amount of your programming to them and their work. And note, they do not have to be on every panel about their work – it can be better if they aren't.

3. Your program should be chock-full of things you want to go see. If it isn't, why are you doing this?

4. Know your panelists. Who work well together? Who needs a firm moderator? Who is currently feuding with whom? Who is good to put on panels that need another person, i.e., can talk about many things well and entertainingly. (Buy that person a beer or a martini or whatever else they need at every opportunity. They're GOLD.) Know who has hobby-horses that need avoiding. If you have, for some reason, to program with panelists you don't know well, find someone who does and bribe them with whatever is necessary to get them to help you. The panelists are the actors who will execute your plan; do a good job of casting them and you'll all be happier.

5. Your panelists, moderators, and staff are your prime assets work hard to give them what they need and they'll work hard for you.

6. Comedy is always popular, but hard.

7. Try new things. Steal from other cons' programming. Ask people for ideas. Collect program books and pocket programs from other conventions. Even conventions very different from yours can provide a new idea for organizing or staging or something.

8. In this, as in so much of life, balance is key. Not everything needs to be Bright! Shiny! and New! But some of it had better be. Good luck.

Thinking About Program (with footnotes)

Priscilla Olson

O.K...I can make allusions to planting a garden (um, “compost” and all)—or giant jigsaw puzzles (which example, alas, tends to leave out the “artistic/organic” part of the process.) How about cellular protein synthesis: there are such great analogies implicit in replication and transcription, and what about those polypeptides (panel items?) produced at the ribosomes (program heads?) No...let me try to do this straight.

This essay is not really meant to discuss how to put together a program for a science fiction convention. It is a look at some of my thoughts on the subject of programming

(Note, however, that practice is informed by policy—what one does and how one does it are direct consequences of what one’s philosophy is on the subject. Because of this, there will almost certainly be some how-tos embedded in the text.)

These ideas apply to both Worldcon programs¹ and to those of smaller conventions. It will attempt to explore my thoughts on some basic issues someone programming a convention should consider—and, if at all possible, implement.

Who is the program for?

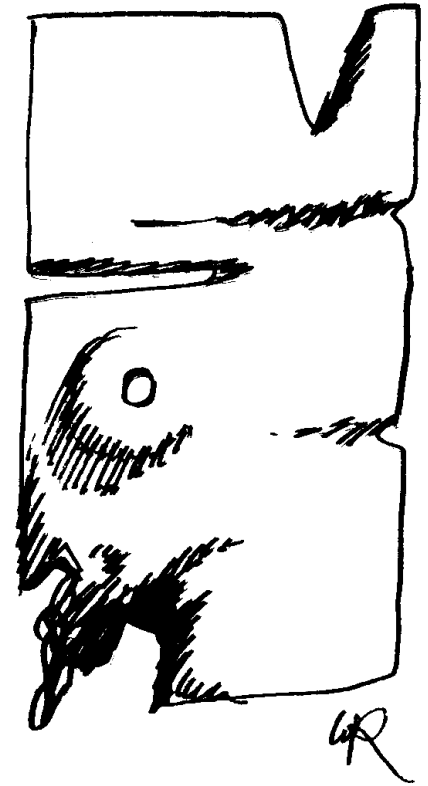
The program is for your convention community. It is not for the program head. It is not for the chair of the convention, or

¹ I think it’s important to note that for a Worldcon, program is more a giant *area* than a division: it concentrates, basically, on one (admittedly large) project, and I think that makes it differ from the other standard Worldcon divisions. Additionally, in many ways, programming for a Worldcon is easier than programming for a smaller convention. For the former, one has nearly unlimited resources: space, people, time, etc. Generally, too, a Worldcon is meant to be strongly inclusive; practically anything goes. A smaller convention is lapidary work; it’s all about precision, and is frequently harder to do.

for any specific guest(s) of the convention. It is not for the convention that someone thinks you should have or for the one someone wants to have in the future. Program heads who refuse to understand this concept, should not be doing the job.

Can one incorporate items into the convention that serve the other causes listed above? Of course! (In fact, it would be ridiculous not to do so. The program must not devolve into a stagnant reflection of the past!) But because the program is conversation between members of the convention (see below), the program head is responsible for putting together a program that is first and foremost for the people who will be there and who have certain expectations of that particular convention—and that program should be balanced² accordingly.

² When you get right down to it, programming is really about balance. That word will show up again and again in this discussion. Serious? Fannish?



What is the program for?

Teresa Nielsen Hayden once described the program as orchestrating³ "the conversation of the convention" and that's a great short summary. The main job⁴ of the program head is to put together a schedule of interesting topics staffed with interesting people who'll talk about them in ways that extend the conversation to the convention. The conversation (two-way or multi-way interactions) takes place between and among the members of the convention community⁵—all of them at one time or another if the job is done well. A really great program is one whose ideas are still being

How much of one topic? How much fringe? How much specific? How much abstract? Etc.

While I can describe how I can sometimes achieve this balance by staring at a giant piece of foam core covered with scraps of paper and going into a Zen-like trance (allowing me to see the convention holistically) and then applying feng-shui principles to it, that would sound like the claptrap it probably is. Sorta works for me, though. Find your own way, grasshopper...

³ And like a conductor, the program head isn't actually making the music (though some insist on a very, um, hands-on performance of the job), but balancing all parts of the orchestra so the performance is better than the orchestra could have done by itself.

⁴ Please note that I am making some distinctions between "job" and "responsibility" here. While the former is merely a description of what someone does, the latter has, I believe, personal and moral connections and implications, some of which will be dealt with in the following section. Just want to make that clear.

⁵ For example, because I strongly believe a convention should be a community, I'm opposed to closed-door writing workshops at most of the conventions in which I'm involved. I believe such workshops foster inwardly-directed behavior (navel-gazing, if you will) that isolates and often selects for people who do not truly become part of the convention community as a whole.

discussed days later by people who didn't even attend the original program item!

So what makes a good conversation? In a nutshell: lively, knowledgeable, articulate people talking to each other, interactively,⁶ about some interesting subject.⁷

So, the program is basically produced by joining together ideas and people to best deliver these ideas—but it's really about more than that. After all, it's pretty easy to generate ideas (even good new ideas),⁸ and not even that hard to get pretty good people to present them. The trick lies in combining them right, and scheduling them properly. The program head⁹ might best be thought of us as of an editor, striving for an interesting balance of ideas and people that will let him turn his visions into realities. Knowing the field and the potential program participants helps: imagination and creativity are important—but obsessive attention to details is essential. (Lots of people don't

⁶ I hate, hate, hate "panels" where individuals are essentially encouraged to give their oration/agenda on a topic, seriatim. (And then the audience starts. Gack.) Hate.

⁷ Though it is a truth universally acknowledged that the right people can make anything interesting.

⁸ Yeah, ideas are easy—doing them right is hard. I am strongly against sending program participants checklists of ideas. I am aware that this is a bit of a "religious" issue, but since over a third of my good ideas for each convention comes directly from said program participants (the remaining 2/3 split between coming from myself or swiped from other convention), I'd be foolish to try to do a program so robotically.

⁹ I think a strong "buck-stops-here" decision maker at the center of the programming process is vital, whose word should not be overruled even by the chair. This feeling has strengthened as I've gained more experience in convention programming. One result of this, for example, is that I used to be much more comfortable with "road-show" panels (put together by outside groups): I am now far less inclined to schedule them than I have been in the past.

understand that part.) To produce a really good program, the devil is in the details.¹⁰

What is the responsibility of the program head?

First, do no harm. Do nothing to enrage or embarrass program participants, members of the convention, the committee, etc.¹¹

Do your best. Try not to get lazy: do not take the easy way out. Think. Stay alert. Seize opportunities. Use people. Use technology.¹²

Communicate. (Be polite about it, too.) Answer every piece of paperwork/queries in a reasonably timely and affable manner. (Even if it kills you—but don't assume that anyone has actually read anything sent to him/her.)

Realize life isn't fair. (And you don't have to be fair either).¹³

Balance. Burnish. Balance again.¹⁴

Try to have fun. If you're not having fun, that will be reflected in the program, and in you, too. It's often a big, hellish, and frequently fraught job.¹⁵ Sometimes those of us involved forget it's only a con, and that real life is more important.

¹⁰ There are too many things to even start to go on about here: just think how many pages could be written about counter-programming the convention's Guests, for example.

¹¹ OK, there are a lot of fairly subtle ways of taking revenge on the assholes who have made your life miserable during the course of your position as program head. Just make sure it looks nice on the outside.

¹² And/or get someone on your staff who can and will!

¹³ Just to clarify one possible spin-off of this: I think treating fans on the program differently from pros on the program is abhorrent. Program participants are there because of what they can contribute to the conversation of the convention community—and the convention should be encouraging conversation, not idolatry.

¹⁴ See #2 above.

¹⁵ It's still is my favorite job on a convention. That sez something, huh?

Why do we do this?

For the sake of the trust.¹⁶



¹⁶ With a fond nod to the Musgrave Ritual...

Running a Children's Program

Lisa Hertel

When fandom was first founded, nobody thought about a children's program. It wasn't until the 1970's, when the male-female ratio improved enough to make interfan marriage and children likely, that the first thoughts of having some place at a convention to leave, and perhaps entertain, your child crossed into the fannish consciousness. The first children's program that I know of was at Noreascon II (1980), when two couples, all on the committee, had children. In the beginning, it started as something slightly more than babysitting, but as fannish families aged, they wanted more, and now several conventions have extensive programs geared to kids of all ages.

Many smaller conventions, however, still eschew a children's program. It's true that it does cost quite a bit, especially to start one.

Craft supplies are a major expense, and bulky: soon, the pile of 'kid's crap' may threaten to overtake your storage. But the expense is often outweighed by the benefits: keeping noisy younger kids out of hallways, allowing committee and program participants who are parents to fully volunteer, and even attracting families.



Program Philosophy

There are many aspects building to children's program. First, consider the ages you wish to service. There are five basic age categories:

- Infant (under 2)—not much you can do with this age but keep them safe and provide approved toys; check with local laws as to approved adult/child ratios
- Toddler/preschooler (2—5)—very short attention span; may be able to do simple crafts; needs snacks and probably diapers; likes to run around; care may be governed by laws; must have two adults minimum (for potty break coverage)
- Early elementary (6—9)—moderately short attention span; can do more complex crafts, read/write, and participant in some structured activities; bathroom independent, but needs supervision & watching when outside the kids' area
- Tweens (10—12)—have different interests than any other group, often focused on relationships; still prefer hands-on participatory activities; require some autonomy
- Teens (13—16)—can participate in adult activities, but prefer to be with their peers in an unstructured environment; will still enjoy sufficiently advanced crafts and hands-on activities; probably should be allowed to come and go freely

Each age group has its own needs, interests, and capabilities. Most conventions are too small to service all

groups, and ignore one or both groups on the ends (infants, toddlers, and teens). Conventions also often lump together several groups, which poses a challenge to the person running children's program. The commonest division is to provide basic babysitting care for children under 5 or 6, and activities for elementary-aged children under 13. Some will run program, such as anime, for teens as part of the normal program.

Once you've sorted out age groups, there's a philosophical question to answer: are you program, or childcare? In part, local laws may dictate this. Many conventions create a cut-off age, under which a child may not roam alone. If your convention is very small, and the children are well known, it's likely that children of all ages can roam at will.

On the total program side, children's program does not close for lunch, does not provide snacks, and does not supervise who is going where—after all, the general program allows ebb and flow. Instead, it just concentrates on offering program items that will appeal to the target age group. Adults are usually welcome to join in, though children often get preference on limited materials. Depending on the size of your younger population, it is reasonable to consider this a one-person-run program track. Basically, if children are free to wander in and out (perhaps with suitable parameters set by parents), then you are program.

On the total childcare side, parents (or other responsible parties) are required to sign children out of a room, to which non-parentally associated adults may not enter. Snacks, and sometimes meals, are provided. Care is

often given professionally, which comes at an expensive price. Conventions often chose to 'hide' the childcare room, by only telling parents the location. Parents may also be charged extra, or pay by the hour, for the professional care. While expensive, professional care has two advantages: it only takes one person to find and organize an agency, and none of your staff burns out by being stuck in a room with small children all weekend. In essence, though, if you are stopping children from leaving the area where children's program is held, you are automatically childcare, whether you use professionals or college students.

However, you can span the spectrum, and most children's programs do. You can limit the egress of children as designated by their parents (usually with red versus green ribbons). Closing for meals encourages parents to feed their children regularly—and some parents will forget, and not feed their kids, caught up in the con fever. If a parent wants to feed his or her child in children's program, insist they sit with the child, because kids are easily distracted away from their dinners, and nobody likes to find a cold, half-eaten chicken nugget on the floor. You can serve snacks, which is usually a good idea with younger children, anyway; just be careful to avoid the common allergens, such as chocolate and peanuts, and have a gluten-free, dairy-free, wheat-free snack available, such as fruit snacks. Juice boxes, while more expensive than buying a bottle of juice, spill less; buy the small ones, and let older kids drink two. (Anyone with severe allergies really ought to bring their own snacks.)

Practical Concerns

When one deals with children nowadays, one often deals with severe medical conditions. It's a very good idea to have the parents fill out a simple form with their basic information (hotel room number, cell number, who can pick the kids up if it's restricted, and allergies or medical conditions). If possible, one person in the children's program should know basic first aid, including child CPR, and, if possible, how to use an Epi-Pen and

an inhaler. Anaphylactic allergies, ADHD, asthma, diabetes, learning disorders, and autism-spectrum diseases are fairly common. If you honestly feel you can't deal with a child's particular medical condition, tell the parents as quickly as possible, and offer to refund memberships as needed. Always have the childcare contact information on the convention's website, so that parents may send in their concerns pre-con. Some consistency in childcare staff is useful, as the 'problem' children are known.

Be sure that parents always write their cell number on the back of all kids' badges, though age 16. Have Sharpies at registration and in children's program.

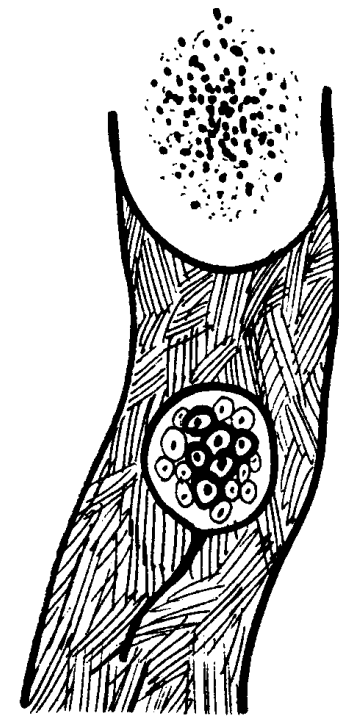
Many conventions worry about the cost of childcare, and who will pay for it. Many years ago, I had one parent tell me that an adult weekend membership for each of her kids was incredibly cheap compared to the cost of babysitting. Even with rising convention rates, that is still true today. Many parents understand this, and are willing to even pay extra for a quality program. However, most conventions consider childcare, which is oftenest used by those either working the convention, or on the program, as an acceptable loss. For one, without the program, you would lose the entire family, including not only the membership, but also the room-nights in your hotel. And if that family is volunteering on the convention in some way, you've lost some of your labor as well. Even if you don't have enough children to run a program for a particular age group, have specific methods for parents to meet up and create their own playgroup, or hire a sitter in advance. (Saying "the hotel has a sitter service" is insufficient.)

Program Pointers

Kids are not miniature adults. They have different interests, a different attention span, and a different way of interacting. Whereas your standard adult audience is quite content to sit, listen, and maybe ask questions, that sort of

program items will not work for children, even in a more unstructured setting. Kids are very 'hands-on.' They need to be doing things constantly, and the program participants running any particular item have to be flexible, as well. Demonstrations need to be dramatic. Kids want to constantly touch things, create things, and move. Give them a bunch of tape, rolls of foil, scissors, random craft bits, and plenty of cardboard, and they're happy. Ask them what their favorite book is, and they'll clam up. The only exceptions are movies, storytelling, and singing; even young children will often sit and listen in these instances. However, program participants need to not be offended if a kid wanders off to play during story time; the child is probably still listening.

Some program participants will not work with children, and some who will just are awful with them. As to the former, you need to ask well before the convention program is set; if possible, ask it on your program participant surveys. As to the latter, that is something you can only learn by experience. (This is true of any program participant, of course.) Don't be too desperate to put everyone who asks on program, even if you know then item won't work, or the participant is awful. It's pretty easy to find simple "filler" crafts, especially if you shop websites like Oriental Trading, or do a web search for suggested teacher



YOU, MINUS TEN SECONDS

projects. A bin of Legos will keep 6- to 12-year-olds amused for a couple of hours; a set of wooden trains will keep toddlers through kindergarteners happy for a morning. Both of these are examples of items that require little guidance beyond some refereeing. In the evening, try a movie, but be sure you have the proper A/V equipment; six children gathered around a laptop screen isn't pretty.

There are some things that you just cannot do with children. Stay away from anything excessively dangerous, no matter how much the kids will love it, like jumping on (or off of) beds. Avoid anything that will make parents hate you too much, such as putting stickers in hair, permanent paints, and PG-13 movies. Try not to do things that modern sensibilities view as bad, such as leaving the TV on all the time, stuffing kids with empty sugar, or hitting children. (You may need to discipline children in extreme cases, and don't be afraid to do so, but use modern methods such as time-outs.) However, kids love doing the stuff their parents won't let them do at home: making a mess is particularly popular. So long as you have the ability to clean it up, do it! However, be aware of your facility's limitations, too.

Probably the hardest part of running children's program is finding a volunteer. Parents tend to get tagged most often. However, as their children grow up, the parent volunteer moves on, you'll need to find a new parent. Further, volunteering to run the kids' stuff is viewed as unglamorous, and many volunteers are afraid to get stuck in a rut for years. Further, if you're not using professionals, or treating it strictly as program, you'll need a small crew. Recruiting college students as helpers is usually a plus, and conventions can even use volunteers under 18 for the younger set, but they'll need supervision. If you can find someone who is willing, make sure there's a backup to take over. Since there's a bit of a learning curve in knowing who is good on program, the kids' personalities, and what works, it's always best to have an understudy.

Conclusion

If you decide to run a program for kids, know what ages you'll be aiming for, and whether you intend to treat the program as panels aimed at kids, or babysitting, or something in between. Next, decide on pricing, hours, and location. Make sure you have program participants who want to work with kids, and program items suitable to your intended age group. You'll need supplies, especially art supplies, and suitable toys to occupy kids. Finally, you'll need to find a volunteer to coordinate it all, and get them assistants if needed. Add in a little bit of paperwork for safety's sake, and you've got a children's program!



Be Our Guest: The Green Room

Ann Totusek

Guests and program participants are a critical part of a successful convention. Keeping them happy and healthy is in part the responsibility of the person running the Green Room. Depending on budget and priorities, a Green Room can be extremely simple- a room with a few chairs and tables with a beverage station, or it can be decadent- full meals provided along with alcohol and a chocolate fountain! Whatever the budget, the following are things to consider in order to make your Green Room a success:

A peaceful, attractive environment- One of the purposes of a Green Room is to provide a place for guests and panelists to retreat between their program items. Panelists may wish to meet prior to a panel to gather their thoughts and organize the flow of their panel. Or they may wish to find a place to retreat to after a lively panel. Extremely well-known Guests of Honor may appreciate the relative privacy of a Green Room where they can be assured that there will be a far smaller number of star-struck fans approaching them while they sit down and take a break. I often post a notice outside or just inside a Green Room encouraging people to be mindful of their noise levels in consideration of others using the room. The Green Room is not the ideal place for contentious discussion.

Like your food, decor can be minimal or over the top. You may wish to not decorate at all, but simply have your facility set up its tables with tablecloth and draping. Consider both the needs of your guests and the needs of your staff in arranging your decor. Avoid decorations that will hinder clean up and act as garbage magnets.

Cleanliness- Have you ever eaten at a buffet restaurant, and as you were eating observed the staff of the restaurant

replenishing the buffet only to notice things that immediately squelched your appetite? An employee who sneezes on their gloved hands, cross-contaminates food, or fails to keep cold items cold and hot items hot? Providing food for free doesn't relieve you of the responsibility to ensure that the food you provide is safe, and believe me- your guests will be observing you and your staff. Ensure that you and your staff use proper handwashing technique and safe food handling practices.

Ensure that the hotel empties garbage, vacuums the floor, and changes out table coverings as necessary. During the first garbage change out, request extra garbage bags and ask hotel staff if there is somewhere you can leave full bags in the event that hotel staff is not immediately available so that your area remains clean and uncluttered.

One trick I have learned is to determine my layout and number of tables ahead of time, and purchase clear plastic tablecovers that I cut to fit the tables. This makes clean up a snap and minimizes the number of times that I have to call hotel in order to have linens changed. It also can contribute to your decor- pictures, book covers, artificial flowers stripped from their stems, and other items can be placed under the clear plastic to serve as decoration.

Beverages- I like to have a range of beverages available. In addition to soft drinks, I try to include a selection of teas, hot cocoa, apple cider, and fruit flavored water. In addition, I also ask the hotel to set up a water station in the Green Room. If your budget permits, you can ask the hotel manage your coffee for you. This will save you some work and give you some goodwill from the hotel's catering department.

Food!- What you serve and how you serve it is the cornerstone of your Green Room. Obviously your menu is to a large extent dictated by your budget, and also by the history of your Green Room. If your Green Room has a history of being a chips and dip type room, you've got a simple situation on your hands, but generally Green Rooms are a more "upscale" version of the ConSuite. I try to include full sandwich makings and stretch my budget by making a variety of soups. Soups are filling, and welcome item that adds a homemade touch to the Green Room. I also stretch my budget by doing as much home baking as possible. I can make a huge number of cookies, bars, and breads for a fraction of the cost of purchasing a similar number of bags or boxes of cookies. One nice thing about doing this is that a lot of these can be made ahead of time and frozen until they are transported to the convention. Also, I've had good luck recruiting friends and asking "Hey, could you please make a batch of your special cookies for the Green Room?" I apply this approach to my main dishes as well- I will purchase the fixings for tuna salad and chicken salad, and add that freshly made to the more traditional deli meats. Again, making it myself ensures that it's fresh, and also saves quite a bit of money.

Another labor saving option is to use canned vegetables for dips. Here's a particular favorite of mine. It involves fresh cilantro, fresh green top onions, garlic and an avocado. Everything else comes from a can. We couldn't keep this on the table at the last Windycon!

Cowboy Caviar

- 2 tbsp red wine Vinegar
- 1/2-2 tsp hot pepper sauce
- 2 tsp olive oil
- 1 medium sized clove garlic, minced
- dash of fresh ground black pepper
- 1 can (15 oz) black beans rinsed and drained
- 1 can corn, drained
- 1 ripe avocado, chopped
- 1 15 oz can finely diced tomato
- 1/4 cup sliced scallion, white and green parts
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro

Mix all ingredients in a bowl. For best flavor, let it sit for a couple of hours to allow the flavors to blend.