

STARTING A NEW CONVENTION: HELIOSphere

Mark Richards, Catelynn Cunningham, and Liz Crefin

HELIOSphere/New Amsterdam Science Fiction and Fantasy Fandom (NASF³)

Our thanks to the Smofcon 36 programming team for asking us to present on this topic.

We'll be sharing our experiences, hoping that the major points we cover are widely applicable, while knowing that some of our experience is unique.

- **First, a little history ...**

For the past few years members of our core group worked on various conventions, both local and farther afield. We've worked, and continue to work, on Arisia, Boskone, Philcon, etc., as well as on Worldcons and NASFiCs (Montreal, Aussiecon 4, Reno, MAC 2, San Juan). So, when Lunarians, which was local to us, set about reorganizing their club and convention, and seemed open to new blood, we joined in the effort.

What happened over the course of the following year is a long story, which we won't cover here. The revamped Lunarians turned out to be just as dysfunctional as the original model, and Mark, as the original chair for the 2016 Lunacon, found his position untenable and resigned as chair in December 2015.

- **A new start**

A few weeks later, at Arisia (Jan 2016), some of our friends asked us why we didn't start our own convention. After all, we had energy. We had a willing core group. So, at Arisia, we put together a flyer for a con TBA in spring of 2017 in the NYC area, to get some buzz going.

When we got home, we decided we were really going to do this and got to work, scouting for hotels, etc., as well as laying the groundwork for an organization.

We were lucky in that we got a good response from the DoubleTree in Tarrytown which has 246 hotel rooms and 20,000 square feet of meeting space. It helped that the sales manager we spoke with initially actually knew about SF conventions from having dealt with Albacon.

By March of 2016 we had an organization (see the next point for more on that), a hotel contract, and dates for our first convention in 2017. During that same time, after much gnashing of teeth and tearing of hair, arrived at our name, HELIOSphere.

From idea to announcement was 3½ months. This is probably not typical. YMMV.

- **Get your ducks in a row, organizationally.**

At the same time that we were searching for a hotel we worked on setting up our organization. We knew we were going to be a not-for-profit, and decided to apply for 501(c)3 status. We set up our corporation, a relatively simple job in New York. We applied for federal tax-exempt status and got our 501(c)3 status in April 2016. We also got our exemption from sales and use tax from New York, invaluable in saving us hundreds of dollars in our hotel costs.

As part of filing for corporate status, we wrote a basic set of bylaws, plagiarizing liberally from those of other clubs, and constituted our initial board of directors. We were set.

- **Financials**

We of course also had to set up our organization financially. You need bank account(s), and eventually, credit card processing. Find a bank that's friendly to small businesses and non-profits, assuming you're organizing as the latter. We were able to get a free checking account at the bank where we already had personal accounts.

For credit card processing, we looked for an online vendor that did not charge a monthly fee. We found a vendor that was offering an introductory no-fee deal.

What is really critical is that you need seed money to start. You also cannot assume you're going to make money the first year. Therefore, you either need the cash or the credit to float the loss yourself, or you need a backer willing to do so. Do not mortgage your house or spend your kid's college fund. They are more important than this.

- **Know/understand your market/audience/community.**

First of all, we prefer "community" as opposed to "market" or "audience" since we ourselves are part of the group that we are appealing to. We understand that for other types of conventions it may be different.

With HELIOsphere, we started off with the model of the traditional SF convention with which we're familiar and on which we've worked: Philcon, Boskone, Albacon, Capclave, and yes, Lunacon. We also wanted to bring younger people into fandom, as our core group has a large proportion of younger people.

We thought about what we'd do that would set us apart and help us accomplish our aims. Right away we decided we would do late night, "adult" programming: edgier, sexier. We haven't kept secret that some of us are part of those other communities.

In that respect, to some extent we've emulated Arisia, but more along the lines of an Arisia writ small (which leads to the point about not biting off more than you can chew). Arisia, in fact, is one of the models we also looked to for inspiration, both because it has the type of late night programming we wanted to put on and has a demographic with lots of younger fans.

- **Don't take on more than you can manage.**

We have space limitations. We have bandwidth limitations both collectively and individually and have a relatively small core group/committee. In the beginning we made a conscious decision to not take on any functions that would distract us and take up resources we didn't have. To cast that positively, we decided we'd let the con grow organically, at a pace we could manage.

For example, we don't have an art show. They require resources we don't have, both in terms of specialized equipment (art show hangings) and the number of volunteers needed to run the area well.

What we did do is have a featured artist our first two years. We invited Heidi Hooper the first year. We gave her a table in a prominent place in the dealers room, with some freestanding gridwall on which to hang her work; she was very happy with the arrangement. We did the same thing this past convention with Tom Kidd. He in fact did not use all of the gridwall we set up. A couple of other artists who had taken dealer's tables used what was left to hang their work, arranging it among themselves. (So, I guess we did have a small art show, of sorts.)

We grow areas as knowledgeable people to run them join us. We added filk the second year, and we are adding anime in the third year. In both cases, experienced people stepped forward, offering to run these areas, and we took them up on it.

If you don't know how to do it, find somebody who does.

- **Scale your systems appropriately.**

If you're running a 100 person relaxacon, you can get away with running your registration on index cards. Anything bigger, not so much — especially if you're doing any of this online.

The same goes with program and events. We use WordPress in putting together and managing our website. They have adaptable themes, some of which are well suited to running conferences. We've made liberal use of this in organizing our guests and our program, along with Google shared spreadsheets — which is working so far.

Some may want to look into some of the other solutions out there; they have their pros and cons in terms of scalability, cost, and the work involved in implementing them.

- **Now let's talk about your core team.**

We started with people we had worked with previously at other conventions. Most of our core team came from there.

If you are recruiting friends without con experience, make sure they are also people you can work with, without damaging the existing friendship. The pressures of con-running can put a lot of strain on friendships if it's not something you're all already used to. Make sure everyone is comfortable working in a hierarchy, taking and following direction. Those who are more in charge must be able to assume a leadership role without being overbearing and assuming too much.

You have to be prepared that not every friend is going to work out as a colleague, and you're going to have to let some people go. That does not mean you should not treat them with kindness and consideration as much as possible.

You have to be able to trust the people you bring on.

- **Delegation and team development.**

Just because you have the skills to do it, doesn't mean you should. It's likely that, especially when starting out, the core team members are each going to wear many different hats. The trick is to figure out who can do what without burning out any team members. Sometimes this means that the best person for the job shouldn't be the person doing the job, because there's someone else who is not overloaded and can get things done “good enough.” Remember the 80/20 rule (Pareto principle).

- **Be open**

Don't lose sight of your mission but be open to new ideas.