



# **Magic Convention Planning Guide**

Bruce Chadwick MA, M.Div.

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## INTRODUCTION

A phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the development of the magic convention. It grew out of the desire for magicians to gather for fun and fellowship. From there gatherings morphed into more structured events with shows, contests, lectures, workshops, and special magic happenings. Dynamics such as location, planning, leadership, technology, and even the status of magic in general, began to mold magic conventions into the modern entities they are today.

It is interesting that very little has been written about magic convention planning. The first “how to” written work I know of was the history I authored in 1988, the year I was President of the Texas Association of Magicians and our Fort Worth Magicians Club hosted the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual TAOM convention.

With all the hard work, intense decisions that had to be made, and the steep learning curve we endured to plan and execute that great convention, I decided it would be a prudent to archive our accomplishments. The move was to chronicle what our host club did, both right and wrong, and note where we might improve when we hosted future conventions. Thus the document “The 1988 TAOM Convention: A History of its Planning and Execution” was penned.

In 2000, the Texas Association of Magicians held a Planning Summit in Austin, Texas. The Board of Directors decided it was time to evaluate the status of the organization and analyze its convention procedures and protocols. This led the group to commission a broader “TAOM Convention Planning Guide” to help TAOM host clubs as they planned TAOM conventions.

As the Historian of the organization, I was conveniently “assigned” the role as editor. Information from my 1988 document was used as the core of the guide. The guide was then augmented with additional text and contributions by Judy Hollingsworth, David Hira, Scott Wells, Trixie Bond, Chuck Lehr, Paul Siegel, Kevin Stadler, Steve Burton, Mark Roberts, Louis Daniel, Bob Utter, Mica Calfee, and others.

The intention of the 2000 guide was that it be fluid, with the hope that as clubs hosted TAOM conventions, they would add to the guide, give additional perspective and keep it up to date. While the idea was sound, lack of future contribution quickly became a problem. However it is understandable. When clubs finish hosting their conventions, committee members are weary and the wherewithal to contribute to some nebulous convention planning guide is minimal.

It is now unbelievable that the original 2000 document is a whopping twenty-two years old. Expectations, attitudes, tastes, opinions, and perspectives have evolved. The art of magic has changed drastically. While many of the ideas in the 2000 guide are still sound, other material is obsolete.

As TAOM Historian, I spoke-up at a 2019 TAOM Board of Directors meeting and voiced my opinion that the guide needed to be updated. You would think I would have learned my lesson when I “volunteered” in 2000. Apparently, this was not the case. Once again, I was “commissioned” to produce an updated guide. So for the past three years or so, I have worked on updating the 2000 document. It has been a slow process, but the peer pressure that comes from the TAOM Board of Directors is formidable.

The reality of this guide is finally at hand. Certainly it is not going to revolutionize magic convention planning, but I think it will have its use. Like the two previous documents, it is still nothing more than a compilation of ideas and suggestions that have been gleaned from the experiences, trials, and errors of many people.

Also this updated work is not meant for use only by the Texas Association of Magicians. This new guide is written generically. It is a guide that any magic convention can use. The principles and techniques are universal for any person or group who seeks to put together a magician’s conclave.

Yes, there are Texas Association of Magicians specifics that Texas magic clubs hosting TAOM conventions must consider. Rather than weave TAOM protocols into the various chapters of the guide and muddy the sections for non-TAOM conventions, it was decided instead to just include a brief section at the end for the Texas Association of Magicians.

By no means is this guide intended to be definitive on how conventions must be planned. Certainly it is not comprehensive. What works for one convention may not work for another. Convention Planning Committees should use suggestions only as they deem prudent. Conventions will continue to evolve, technology will continue to change, and ideas that work today may be outdated tomorrow.

Some of the text from the original 1988 historical archive and the 2020 guide is still preserved in this new “Magic Convention Planning Guide.” However most of this guide has been rewritten. Ideas and suggestions from the original two works that are no longer apropos have been eliminated. Many other newer ideas and suggestions have been added.

Please know that anyone who is planning a magic convention is free to use any of the suggestions contained herein. However use should be enacted with discretion. If a suggestion doesn’t make sense or seems outdated, it should not be used. Ideas are not guarantees and they must be used at one’s own risk. At the same time, this information will probably be very useful as it does chronicle many commonsense strategies for practical magic convention planning.

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## **GENERAL CHAIR**

Someone must oversee the overall process of planning a magic convention, and it is usually wise for a Convention Planning Committee to have only one central leader. Sometimes called the General Chair, this person has the ultimate responsibility to lead overall convention organization, planning, and execution. The chair must lead and motivate a group of sub-committees to accomplish goals and tasks.

The General Chair must be a “people person” with exemplary leadership skills. The chair must have meticulous planning ability, provide good organization and able to work as a motivational leader. The successful magic convention comes about because of good communication, respect for people, and understanding. This formula will foster a team of diligent hard-working individuals who generally will work beyond the call to duty to make their magic convention successful.

While there should be only one leader, the General Chair must not make all decisions. Major decisions must be made only through the democratic consensus of the Convention Planning Committee. When a General Chair starts making dictatorial decisions without the consensus of the team, the gates of petty politics and disgruntlement begin to open. This can quickly take the fun out of hosting a magic convention for everyone involved.

As well, the Chair should never try to do most of the work. This only leads to confusion, miscommunication, and frenzy. Rather the General Chair should assign, oversee, and lead various committees to do the tasks assigned to them. The Committee Chair must make sure the heads of various committees clearly know what is expected of them, maintain expectations, accountability, and oversee communication.

If there is any basic advice regarding how to host and plan for a magic convention, it would be that it is never too early to start planning. Most conventions start planning several years in advance. The initial steps are to choose a date for the convention, and then choose a convention hotel and perhaps a theatre for the evening shows. Hotel and meeting facility choices are monumental, for they set the tone for the entire convention.

Contracts and agreements with hotels and theaters must be made early. However it is possible that the person who will become General Chair may not yet be decided. It may be prudent for a planning group or club to elect a person to be a temporary representative to get contracts and agreements in place. When the General Chair is finally determined, the chair can take over the planning and leadership.

The General Chair should constantly “think through” the convention, jot down thoughts and ideas, consult previous convention planners, and ask lots of questions. The chair should try to examine what makes other conventions successful, and not be ashamed to “borrow” successful ideas when prudent.

## **COMMITTEE PROFILES**

Convention Planning Committee chair profiles define roles and assignments. It is most important for a convention to have a list of the committees and the definition of each committee's responsibilities in writing. This way people will clearly know what is expected of them. They will also know the roles of the other committee members so that clarity and transmission is maintained.

The Committee Profiles presented near the end of this guide is recommended as a start. However the list will probably have to be modified to fit both the Planning Committee's needs and the abilities of its chairmen. When assigning committee chairs, the abilities and talents of people should be carefully evaluated. Sometimes people have certain abilities and resources that make them ideal for specific committees. It might also be possible for the same person to serve on multiple committees or even chair two or more committees.

Committee chairmen should also be made to understand that they can secure volunteers to be part of their committee and help them accomplish their tasks. They should call meetings of their committee as needed.

## MANAGING VOLUNTEERS

Most conventions are executed by volunteers. For their input and contribution to be maximized, they must be managed with congeniality and respect. They should be motivated to do their tasks incrementally rather than all at once.

The people who chair committees usually come from the ranks of a host magic club. A simple sign-up sheet can be used initially to canvas magic club membership to see who might be interested in helping plan the convention. At initial Convention Planning Committee meetings, chairs can be assigned.

As individuals are chosen to do the various Convention Planning Committee roles, a person's talents and abilities should be carefully weighed. It is best to take advantage of a person's strengths and offer special help where they are weak. If it is evident that a person doesn't have the wherewithal to accomplish a particular role, then obviously that person may not be the best candidate for the job.



Be warned that some individuals have "type A personalities" that cause them to be potentially overbearing and controlling. These types of individuals should be handled carefully.

The General Chair must keep in mind that planning committees are usually comprised of unpaid volunteers. As such, they must be managed as volunteers. While some volunteers will excel in their roles, only reasonable results should be expected from others. Fortunately with proper leadership, volunteers usually give their full contribution potential, and especially if they are praised and respected. The key to get them to do tasks is to give them responsibility and provide them with good leadership.

Having periodic planning meetings with all sub-committee chairpersons in attendance is essential. If committee chairs know what is expected of them, and everyone knows what other chairmen are supposed to do, polite peer pressure will be formed, and reliability will usually be maintained. Also having periodic convention planning meetings with all committee chairpersons in attendance helps clarify responsibilities and measure progress.

However it should be kept in mind that sometimes people fail in their commitments. Perhaps they simply aren't cut out for their job. Most often however, life, health, family, occupational obligations, and unforeseen circumstances are the culprits that get in the way of accomplishments. Wise General Chairs will be on their toes and shift duties and responsibilities as needed, or even replace a committee chair if needed.

Chosen wisely, most volunteers will do a good job with their responsibilities. They should be constantly encouraged, praised, and thanked. They should be built-up and led with compassion and understanding. They are generally doing difficult jobs for free and should be commended as their work progresses.

When the convention is history, the General Chair should take the responsibility to show gratitude in ways that are meaningful. Each committee Chair of the Planning Committee should be recognized for their accomplishments and not their failures. Special appreciation certificates, plaques, and other gestures of appreciation are a must. People must never be taken for granted.

## **COMMUNICATION**

For a Convention Planning Committee to function successfully, good communication is essential. Methods of communication will vary depending on the information to be communicated. The use of e-mails, phone calls, text messages, letters and even personal visits cannot be overly emphasized. Notifications about planning meetings must be sent well in advance. Magic clubs hosting conventions can also use verbal announcements at magic club meetings and use their club newsletter and email communications to make notifications. A good General Chair will never allow ineffective communication to cause major problems.

An updated roster of committee chairmen and their contact information such as email address and phone numbers is very important. The roster should be freely distributed to everyone. Committee chairs should be called and reminded the night before convention planning committee meetings. They should also be reminded that they will be asked to report on the status of their accomplishments.

## **CONVENTION PLANNING MEETINGS**

The General Chair should oversee all convention planning meetings. The meetings should be well organized, comprehensive, and kept on track. It is important that major components are not forgotten, and relevant information not missed. All of this requires careful advance preparation.

The General Chair should keep a file on each committee. The information should be kept up to date. It should be reviewed before each Convention Planning Committee Meeting so that pertinence is emphasized, and details are not overlooked. Action items need to be assigned, details outlined, and completion dates determined.

The General Chair should maintain careful notes during Convention Planning Committee meetings. Perhaps it is wise for someone to serve as Secretary to record detailed minutes of meetings. Ideas, thoughts, and suggestions should all be recorded. Properly planned, only a few general Convention Planning Meetings are required to plan a convention.

## **CONCLUSION**

If a convention is planned properly, at the convention the General Chair will not have to run around like a “chicken with his head cut off,” frantically making sure everything is in place, ironing out problems, putting out fires, and so forth. Certainly a few last-minute problems will probably arise during the convention where the General Chair will have to act.

For the most part however, a well-planned convention will allow the Chair to enjoy the convention, the fruit of hard work, leadership, and planning. It is reassuring for the General Chair to know that committees understand their tasks and will take care of problems that arise under their jurisdictions.

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## **REGISTRATION**

The Registration Chair is the person in charge of all convention registrations. The chair schedules staffing of the convention registration booth and operations center, and promptly turns over to the Treasurer any moneys received for registrations. The chair produces badges for convention attendees, supervises the assembly of the convention souvenir packets if used, and may help oversee seating for shows.

One of the most important ingredients for magic conventions are customers. Without an adequate number of convention attendees, a convention will not be successful. The job of Registration Chair is therefore quite important. It is a job that demands prompt and constant attention. The chair must be computer savvy, know how to manipulate spreadsheets and computer data, and have enthusiasm to endure to the very end.

It is also sometimes helpful if the Registration Chair has a spouse, roommate, children, or other dependable helpers who can assist. There are many things that must be done, all the way from correspondence, answering the phone, running errands, to stuffing registration packets.

### **REGISTRATIONS**

Conventions have no rules, few traditions, and sometimes no consistency when it comes to convention registration fees. In determining how much to charge, many factors should be considered. Convention attendees must pay for transportation, food, and lodging, in addition to convention registration fees.

At the same time, magic conventions are also costly to produce. Registration fees must be enough that will make a convention financially sound, while at the same time not be too exorbitant to keep magicians and their families from attending. Expenses for both the convention and for attendees must balance.

Realities have motivated some conventions to have different registration amounts for different types of convention attendees. Some conventions successfully use a higher registration amount for adults and a lower registration amount for children. If this registration technique is used, a convention must define what the term "children" means, such as dependents living in the home or a family member under the age of eighteen.

Another method is to use the full registration and limited registration technique. Full registrations are generally for the magician and allow full access to all convention events. Limited registrations are generally available at a discounted price and are designed for a spouse and family members and gives them only convention show access. At least one full registration should be purchased before limited registrations can be purchased.

Some conventions have moved to a flat fee per person convention registration rate regardless of age or magic interest. In other words, everyone who attends the convention pays the same rate. This simple approach has great advantages. However the expense may dissuade all family members from registering. To offset this, some conventions offer evening show tickets to non-convention registrants so that spouses and children can at least enjoy some entertainment together. It is also a way for the public to attend shows and help augment convention funds.

Many conventions opt for escalating registration rates based upon date. This means that the opening day of registration is the lowest price. Thereafter at certain dates, the registration rate is increased. This helps motivate convention registrants to register early. Other conventions limit attendance, something that may be necessary anyway depending upon the size of the convention hotel and its meeting facilities.

In the past, some conventions have used family registrations. In other words, a family pays one single registration that admits both the parents and all children to the convention. Unfortunately abuse has rendered this approach inadvisable. Unscrupulous "families" comprised cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, and even neighbors from across

the street, may register together under the family registration umbrella. With the proliferation of mixed families in modern society, unmarried couples, children and even spouses having different last names, policing the family registration is all but impossible. Abuse of family registrations can also severely undercut registration profit and hurt a convention.

Lastly, some conventions offer “one-day” convention registrations. Individuals pay a fee to attend just one day of the convention. A day convention registration rate is usually less expensive than the full registration rate. However this technique is not feasible for shorter weekend-long conventions.

## REGISTRATION PROCESS

A convention registration system will need to be generated to register individuals for a convention. The days of paper registration forms have passed. This is the Internet age and convention registration has moved solely to websites and online registration procedures. With the proliferation of the cell phone and other portable computer devices, people have become accustomed to ordering products online. People have no problem registering online for magic conventions as well.



Shopping cart programs on websites go far to facilitate the registration process. Convention attendees can pay online with a major credit card, debit card, or other money transfer method. Bookkeeping and record maintenance has been enormously simplified with online registration methods. Most shopping carts easily allow the Registration Chair, Webmaster, and other administrators to download registration information, usually in spreadsheet formats. Also most carts automatically number and date registrations.

Basic information must always be a part of the registration process. This may include registrant’s names, their addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and credit or debit card information. The registration process usually involves the name of the convention, the dates for the event, and explanations about the convention registration fees. It may also include contact information for the Registration Chair and the name and reservation phone number of the convention hotel.

## REGISTRATION BOOTH

Many hotels have a convention registration booth area that is permanently built into the hotel. Hotels will usually allow conventions to use this area free of charge. If no booth is available, simple tables can be used to provide an ad-hoc registration area.

The registration booth must have electricity and Internet access. A house phone, bulletin board, and back tables for computers and printers may be useful. The booth can be decorated with banners welcoming magicians to the convention. Portable magician’s backdrops can be used to define and decorate registration areas. The booth should open early beginning with the first day of the convention and stay open during reasonable business hours. By the middle of a convention, a registration booth is generally no longer needed to register people for the convention.

The Registration Chair should make sure the registration booth is adequately staffed. It is probably wise to assign individuals specific jobs and work out some form of work schedule. Sometimes local Convention and Visitor’s Bureaus may be willing to provide one or more of their staff or volunteers to work a booth free of charge. The number of helpers a bureau will provide is usually prorated, pertaining to the number of convention attendees. Note however that sometimes bureaus cannot provide staff on holidays or holiday weekends.

If the registration booth must close for dinner and before the first day evening show, it might be a good idea to provide ushers with some sort of printed list with the names of pre-registered attendees and their seat numbers as applicable. Ushers can then permit attendees to enter the auditorium or ballroom and see the first night's show without name badges. Or alternatively, the Registration Chair may opt to keep the registration booth open for late arrivals throughout dinner and during the first night's evening show. During times the booth is closed, a small sign with a phone number can be displayed so that individuals can call and get assistance if needed.

Sometimes hotels can provide a separate room from the registration booth to store materials and equipment to keep the registration booth clutter free. Sometimes called the Operations Center, this room can also provide a resting spot and refreshments for the various convention workers. If computers and other expensive hardware is going to be stored in the room, it is good if the room is lockable, with only the Registration Chair and perhaps the Hospitality Chair having keyed access.

## **AUDITORIUM SEATING**

Early registrations provide early capital for a convention. Fortunately more people register for conventions at the previous year's convention than during any other month. After that however, registrations usually drop-off drastically. Registrations usually pick up steam again right before a convention. Some people even wait until they arrive at the convention to register.

A valuable technique to get people to register early for a convention is to offer early registrants best seating for the evening shows. The earlier an attendee registers for a convention, generally the closer they will sit in proximity to the theatre stage.

There is nothing wrong with this marketing technique so long as attendees who register early for the convention do indeed receive good middle section auditorium seats. They must not be given seats in the front of the house on the far left and right sides of the auditorium. Far left and right seats should be used for the public and non-convention attendees.

There is a growing trend for magic conventions to use general admission seating. This means simply that once the auditorium doors open, people enter the auditorium and seat themselves wherever they want. This is the method that was used for years in the movie theatre industry. However this approach is not without problems.

First and foremost is that convention attendees have no incentive to register early for the convention since they are not being rewarded with best seats close to the stage. Also when the theatre house doors open, a competitive stampede of people rushing into the auditorium is unsightly and perhaps even dangerous. Primal urges are often hard to control!

Conventions that have successfully used the general admission approach and at the same time use the incentive to register early to be rewarded with best seats close to the stage, buffer entry with tiered admittance. Registration group letters are indicated on convention attendee's name badges, with anywhere from 25 to 50 persons included in a group. The first group of persons who registered early for the convention (Group A) enter the auditorium first. They enter through a particular door of an auditorium and seat themselves wherever they want. Once they are seated, the second group of persons enter (Group B), perhaps through a second door of the auditorium and seat themselves. Similar groups follow in consecutive fashion.

As an alternative to this "airline group approach," ushers at the door can just make verbal announcements that individuals in "Group A" may now enter the auditorium through any available door, then "Group B" and so forth. Unfortunately this system tends to crowd doorway entries.

Conventions that use assigned seating have implemented ways whereby registrants can choose where they want to sit in the auditorium for evening shows. This is an easy way to provide incentive for convention attendees to register

early. Some conventions use blown-up theater seating charts to help people choose seats. Other convention registrants who are web savvy use programs where registrants choose their seats as part of their online registration process. This mimics the way many airline companies allow passengers to choose their seats on an airplane.

It may be useful to give good complimentary evening show seating to dignitaries or other special guests as directed by the Convention Planning Committee. Also performers usually receive complimentary registrations as part of their compensation, and they should be given respectable auditorium seat assignments as well. Sometimes they are included in the first group that is allowed into the auditorium. At other times there are seat sections reserved only for performers. Information about talent complimentary registrations and performer contact information must be communicated to the Registration Chair as soon as possible so it can be added to the registration database and convention badges can be generated.

Some conventions mix lay people in among where magicians are seated. Lay people react differently to magic than do magicians. Their enthusiasm, applause, and response is always refreshing and contagious to the magicians seated around them. It is also a good idea to reserve a section in front of an auditorium or ballroom seats for lay persons so that magicians will have a pool of laymen to choose from as volunteers for their acts. There must also be special seating for handicapped persons and for the hearing impaired.

## **NAME BADGES**

Another component that is a very important part of the Registration Chair's job is to produce good convention name badges. Many different styles of clear plastic name badge holders are readily available from various suppliers. Some models allow for a printed name badge in the upper section of the holder while the lower section holds a printed removable convention schedule. Some badges provide magnets and pins for attaching to a person's shirt or lapel. Some can be inserted into a person's front shirt pocket. Most models have attachment points for a lanyard so that a badge can be worn around the neck. Still other conventions use simple pin-type button badges. Others use pin-type badges with lanyards or magnets.

Names on badges (especially an individual's first name) should be bold enough so that it can be seen a few feet away. Computer name badge label software is abundant and sometimes it can even be downloaded free of charge from the Internet. Some labels come in perforated strips of five or more that can easily be sheet fed through computer printers. The registration desk can easily have a computer and a quality printer at the convention registration desk so that name badges can be made on the fly for walk-in registrations.

If assigned auditorium or ballroom seating is used, attendee's seat row and number can be printed on name badges. This reduces the need and cost for printed tickets for convention registrants. As explained above, badges may be labeled with group letters so that attendees can be allowed into the auditorium based upon their registration date. Badges can also be used as the "ticket" for admittance to the dealer's room, lectures, and other convention activities.

Convention badges may also have a QR code printed on them so that attendees with cell phones can have continuous access to the latest updated convention schedule. Some conventions use different color name badges to differentiate between full and limited convention registrations. Other designations can be included on name badges such as backstage access, volunteer recognition, VIP personalities, etc. It is also wise to design a name badge that cannot be easily duplicated by unscrupulous individuals.

Some conventions have used badge colors to separate convention attendees for simultaneous convention events. For example, individuals with a red badge may see a cabaret show while individuals with a blue badge see a lecture. The next day the roles are reversed, and red badge attendees see the lecture while blue badge attendees see the show. This technique is especially useful when seating for an event or show is limited.

## **REGISTRATION PACKETS**

When an attendee arrives at a convention, they are often given some sort of registration packet at the registration booth. Contents of registration packets vary but may include a convention souvenir program, name badges, restaurant guides, brochures about tourist destinations, discount coupons, membership cards, and so forth.

Most Convention and Visitor's Bureaus offer free or low-cost brochures and other literature that may be of interest to convention attendees. Maps, schedules, "things to do and see" guides, bus and mass transit schedules, gifts, trinkets, dining guides, and other items can be included. Creativity can make for a very attractive packet.

Often registration packets are simple letter-sized envelopes with the registrant's name and sometimes registration numbers printed or labeled on the upper portion of the outside. This system allows for easier alphabetizing to make them easier to locate. It is also a good idea to already have a stack of unlabeled registration packets made-up and ready for immediate use for walk-in registrations. Instead of envelopes, some conventions provide canvas bags or other containers and use them for registration packets.

Some conventions have simplified the registration packet system even further by not labeling convention envelopes at all. A person is given his or her name badge and then handed a generic convention envelope. Other conventions eliminate the convention packet altogether and instead put brochures and other information on a table adjacent to the main registration booth. Registrants simply take what they want.

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## **HOTEL**

To facilitate the communication and decision-making process between a magic convention and the convention hotel, one person should be designated as the Hotel Chair. The chair should be granted full authority to represent the convention regarding all matters related to facility decisions, contract negotiations, and hotel use. The chair should work closely with the Sales and Catering department and other hotel management both before, during, and after the convention. The hotel should know the Hotel Chair is their main contact for the convention.

### **CHOOSING A HOTEL**

At one time, many magic conventions held their evening shows primarily in theatres. Economics, convention attendance, and other factors have forced many conventions to move evening shows into hotel ballrooms. The capabilities and capacities of hotel ballrooms are therefore prime considerations when choosing a convention hotel. Additionally, the ability for a hotel to provide adequate meeting spaces for other convention activities, as well as accommodations and amenities for hotel guests must also be considered.

The primary qualification in considering a hotel is whether its ballroom is large enough for a convention's evening shows. Ballrooms have maximum room capacity limits that are usually controlled by local fire authorities. Ballroom capacities during the day for activities such as lectures and so forth are not generally a problem because rarely do all convention attendees attend all day events. The opposite is usually the case for evening shows. These events are generally well attended by most convention registrants. Also add to the mix the possibility that the convention might sell evening show tickets to the public, hotel ballroom capacities become even more important.

If a legitimate theatre is chosen for the evening shows, the convention should consider whether the hotel is within walking distance to the theatre. Otherwise a convention must calculate the costs of busses or other transportation costs to move registrants to and from the hotel and the theatre.

Also a large hotel meeting room that can house all magic dealers together is preferable. If no such room is available, then smaller rooms near each other should be used so that registrants can easily move between one room and another. Signage that delineates that multiple dealer's room are being used is a must. Also having the dealer's room, lectures, and close-up rooms on the same floor as the ballroom benefits convention attendees.

### **HOTEL NEGOTIATION**

Hotels are experts at selling guest rooms. The more rooms a hotel sells, the greater the hotel's revenue. This is their business, and they tend to broker all sorts of deals to do whatever they can to keep their facility booked.

A convention negotiates from a position of strength before the hotel contract is signed. After a contract is signed, a hotel has no incentive to agree to additional amenities or make changes to the contract that are not in the hotel's best interest. Conventions should negotiate with hotels shrewdly and with prudence. Sometimes several editions of the hotel contract must be penned before full agreement can be reached between a magic convention and a hotel.

Hotels usually have standardized contracts that are then modified in the negotiation process. Be aware that hotels are experts when it comes to the content of their contract. They can very easily persuade a magic convention to make concessions, agreements, and contract for services that a convention might not really need and not in a convention's best interest. They can also include legal jargon to impose stipulations that may not be advantageous for a magic convention.

Case in point, for a recent small magic convention, a hotel determined that the convention needed at least 50 guest rooms on Thursday night, the night before the convention began on Friday. When the convention analyzed its needs however, it determined that it needed only 15 rooms for Thursday night. The hotel's response, "Well, we just want to make sure you have enough rooms for Thursday night."

The same hotel wanted a commitment of 200 rooms for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights. The magic convention estimated it needed only 150 rooms. Ultimately the magic convention booked 162 room nights, which was good for the hotel. However if the convention had taken the hotel's recommendation of 200 rooms, it would not have fulfilled its room commitment. The magic convention may have had to pay for the use of the ballroom, dealer's rooms, and close-up rooms, or even worse, pay for the unoccupied rooms.

A hotel may suggest a certain number of rooms per night be reserved. If a convention counters with a lower number and the hotel balks, the magic convention can always suggest that the hotel increase their room rate quote a few dollars to help compensate for the room quantity reduction.

Most hotels offer reward programs for hotel guests. This can be in the form of airline miles, hotel upgrades, and perks such as free restaurant meals. In lieu of hotel giving such rewards to a magic convention, a convention might opt to ask the hotel to give them some complimentary room nights for future use after the convention. If a magic club is hosting the convention, the club can use these complimentary nights for out-of-town magic lecturers.

Before hotel contracts are signed, a convention should know that hotels usually give complimentary room accommodations and sometimes free restaurant meals to the person or persons meeting with their staff and considering their hotel for their convention. Hotels may also give similar complimentary accommodations to magic convention event planners when they must travel to the hotel for hotel management and coordinator meetings. Hotels may also give free meeting room space for Convention Planning Committee meetings.

A convention should determine if there are any plans for hotel renovation, management, or ownership change. The hotel contract, which is addressed more fully below, must be clear regarding what happens in the event of force majeure, such as natural disasters, acts of God, unforeseen circumstances, pandemics, and even hotel incompetence. The contract should also state which days, both before, during, and after the convention, the hotel will honor the convention room rate. The contract should also state when convention attendees can start booking their hotel rooms. Hotels also need to be attentive to give conventions the correct link for reserving rooms.

A hotel should also agree in writing that the hotel will not allow other groups to hold their conventions at the same time as the magic convention. If the hotel must host other activities during the same time, then the hotel should guarantee in writing that said events will be situated away from magic convention activities.

## **GUARANTEES**

Hotels typically provide free meeting room space such as the ballroom and meeting rooms in exchange for a convention guaranteeing that it will book a certain number of rooms. Generally called a "room block guarantee," the guarantee can include nights immediately before and after actual convention dates. Sometimes a percentage occupancy of the number of rooms blocked is required to get complimentary meeting spaces. This is usually about seventy to eighty percent.

Most hotels also want conventions to guarantee a certain amount of food and beverage sales. This has nothing to do with the purchases that hotel guests make in the hotel's restaurants. Rather, contract "food and beverage" means banquet meals and food served for special convention meetings and parties.

Although many magic conventions have given into the idea of a convention banquet to satisfy the food and beverage hurdles, most magic conventions don't need food and beverage. If a magic convention does concede to buy food

and beverage, it should be noted that prices are usually exclusive of service charges. A convention should ask for rates that are inclusive of all service charges. This can provide a convention huge savings.

A convention should be very careful in guaranteeing how many rooms it will occupy. It should consider the consequences a hotel may instill if a convention fails to fulfil its room block contract. Some hotels may require financial remedies for unsold rooms. Others may charge for the use of ballroom and other meeting spaces if a convention does not meet the agreed upon percentage of its room block guarantee. These details should be clearly stated in the hotel contract.

To determine how many room nights a convention may need for its convention, it is a good idea for a convention to check previous convention attendance figures and use these to estimate their upcoming convention attendance.

It should be noted that the room block guarantee number should not be based on a "per night" basis. In other words, the agreement should not be that a particular convention night must have a certain number of rooms rented per night. Rather the guarantee should be based on a "total night" basis, total rooms counted over the duration of the entire convention. For example, five rooms rented for four nights equals twenty total room nights.

Also the convention guarantee should be based on the total number of nights sold for a convention based on accrual. For example, if a guarantee for Friday night is 200 but only 175 rooms are occupied, and then on Saturday night 200 rooms are booked but 225 rooms are occupied, then a proper hotel contract should state that the "200 room night guarantee" has been met.

Also a hotel contract should state that attendees who stay at the hotel for the convention but who did not make reservations prior to the room block cut-off date are still counted toward the room block guarantee.

## **HOTEL CONTRACTS**

The hotel industry is fiercely competitive. Hotels must generate as much revenue as possible to stay in business. It is therefore prudent to know that some hotels sometimes try to slip additional fees into contracts. A convention should be wary of contract language that puts an agreement unduly in the favor of the hotel and not the convention.

Ultimately it will be the convention that will have to sign the hotel contract and be responsible for the parameters of the contract. Obviously, the contract should be completely understood. It is probably a good idea for multiple convention planning committee members to pour over the contract and ask questions. It may even be prudent for a committee to have an attorney view the document before it is signed so that complete understanding is achieved, and potential ambiguity is eliminated.

There should be no hidden hotel charges. There should be no verbal agreements. All agreements must be in writing and clearly stated in the contract.

The rules a hotel may put into a contract and impose on the convention and hotel registrants should be clearly stated. Some union hotels require the use of bell staff and will not allow dealers to carry their own sales stock into the dealer's room. Most hotels do not allow outside catering and require that all food and beverage be purchased from the hotel.

A contract should delineate the days of the convention. It is important to point out to hotels that the day before the convention may be needed to set up hotel ballroom equipment and get dealer booths in place. This should be in the contract as well.

A contract must state clearly which hotel meeting rooms will be used for convention activities. A room schedule of use should be specified. It must delineate both dates and times of use. Many hotels have a clause in the contract stating that the hotel will have the right to release, decrease, and move assigned meeting space. The hotel should



not have the option to arbitrarily move convention activities to other meeting rooms other than as agreed in the contract. A convention can protect itself by making sure the contract states that moving convention activities to other meeting rooms may be done only with the written consent of both parties.

A contract should also clearly state if there are costs for using hotel meeting rooms. As mentioned above, complimentary use of meeting spaces is usually conditional upon convention room guarantees.

Hotels sometimes require a convention to obtain liability insurance and name the hotel as additionally insured. Regardless of hotel requirements, such insurance is probably a good idea anyway due to modern-day liability. Most hotels can suggest insurance companies they are comfortable with.

It is important for the Hotel Chairman or Dealer's Chairman to provide the hotel with CAD drawings (or equivalent) showing how all meeting rooms, including the ballroom, dealer's room, and close-up rooms, will be set-up with tables and chairs.

If hotel pipe and drape curtains are to be used, particularly for dealer's room booths, the contract should specify how much pipe and drape will be provided and the cost thereof. Booths are normally 10 feet wide and 10 feet deep. They are usually furnished with three tables. The front table is usually a standard eight feet long banquet table. The two tables at the back are usually narrow "school tables," with one table stacked upon the other.

The contract should state the complimentary use of ballroom tables and chairs, and dealer's room electricity. Also if a hotel has the ability, the complimentary use of the in-house public address system in the Dealer's Room should be in the contract as well

If the hotel has one, the contract should also state that the convention can have complimentary use of the hotel's Convention Registration Booth. The booth must have Internet and electricity access.

Magic conventions might also ask for the use of a separate room close to the Convention Registration Booth that can be used as an Operations Center. This room can be used to store materials and equipment to keep the registration booth free from clutter. It also provides a private area where problems can be solved, and personnel can meet. It can also serve as a resting spot for workers and where refreshments can be provided. This room should be lockable, with only the Registration and Hospitality chairs having access.

Sometimes dealers and performers send boxes and props to hotels in advance of a convention. Some hotels charge for accepting and storing these packages. It must be agreed in the hotel contract that the charges for these hotel services must be paid by the senders of the packages and not by the magic convention.

The hotel contract should state what other services will be provided and which ones must be purchased. A hotel may provide free easels but will probably charge for printed signs. If it is available, a convention might ask for free usage of the hotel's electronic marquee to let convention attendees know the location and times for convention events. This can also be useful for a convention in advertising shows that might be open to the public. All these specifics must be in the hotel contract.

If a hotel offers free shuttle services, this needs to be stated in the contract. Also hours of operation and shuttle range should be in the contract as well.

If a hotel does not obligate a convention to a food and beverage minimum, or no attrition on the sleeping rooms, this should be clearly stated in the contract.

Conventions should not seek the lowest group room rate. Rather they should go after the lowest published room rate. Many hotels due to the economy have decreased rates and list it on their website. By having this demand in the contract, if a hotel breaches this agreement, they will have to remove the lower rate from their system or match the lower rate for all convention attendees.

After the convention ends and the room pick-up seems low, a room audit should be conducted. The registration list can easily be compared to the guest list. This request should be in the hotel contract. It is best to start the process a few months before the cutoff date and ask for a pace report in intervals of every four weeks or so. The more rooms found outside the room block, the better history and therefore the better negotiating power for future events.

The hotel contract should state clearly what happens if the convention must move to another hotel. Likewise the contract should be specific in stating what financial obligations, charges, or non-refundable deposits might be lost if the convention must change hotels.

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

If a convention has some flexibility when it comes to choosing its meeting dates, it might be prudent to choose dates when hotel occupancy is low. Toward the end of the summer for example, many families have concluded their vacations and children are returning to school. This makes hotel occupancies typically low and hotels are usually more willing to work out convention deals. On the other hand, holiday weekends, weeks of spring break, and so forth when demand for hotel rooms is high, may not be the best time to negotiate great convention hotel rates.

It is a fact that reasonable room rates will attract convention attendance. Even with skyrocketing costs, \$100 to \$150 per night room rates still hold for many quality hotels. Smaller hotels may even have less expensive room rates. Some hotels may want to increase hotel room prices depending upon the number of guests occupying a room. Some hotels charge more for multiple beds and suites.

As a negotiating tool, conventions may consider showing quotes from other hotels that have lower rates. Pitting one hotel's rates against another is a sound negotiating strategy.

A convention should expect to receive a certain number of complimentary or "comp" rooms. One room night for every forty rented room nights is typical. Such agreement should be clearly stated in the contract. Conventions can use comp rooms for convention talent or planning committee dignitaries to reduce overall convention expense.

Amenities such as free or reduced rated parking are a plus. If hotel offers free parking, this should be listed on the contract. By the time the convention takes place, the hotel might be charging for parking. Expensive hotel parking can be detrimental when it comes to coaxing attendees to attend a convention.

If a hotel does charge for parking, the rate should be worked out in advance and specified in the hotel contract. A convention should also ask for convention hotel guest reduced parking rates and determine if there are "in-and-out" charges and the cost.

As another negotiating factor, conventions might recommend to hotels that they sell soft drinks, breakfast foods, box lunches and so forth in the lobby areas outside of the main ballroom or similar areas. With tight convention schedules, and especially around the lunch hour, this will provide a great convenience for convention attendees and is a great way for a hotel to make additional revenue. It also relieves pressure from the hotel restaurant staff during peak times and especially on holiday weekends. If an agreement like this is made, this should be clearly stated in the hotel contract. Whether or not a hotel has free breakfasts and complimentary Internet are also factors to consider. These considerations should be in the contract as well.

A convention should make a master list with the hotel that specifies who is to receive complimentary rooms and hotel services, and whether the cost for said charges should be added to the convention tab, which is often referred to as the "master account." This list should normally be delivered to the hotel several days prior to the convention. Some hotels even delineate in the hotel contract how many days prior to the convention the list must be delivered to them.

It is also a good idea to have in the hotel contract an agreement that all convention hotel guests, including performers and convention committee personnel, are all fully responsible for paying for their own room tabs and incidental room expenses unless otherwise designated.

If a hotel has one, a convention should ask for the complimentary President's Suite. Such a suite can be used for special convention parties and convention meetings. As well, such a suite can usually be traded back to the hotel for two smaller comp rooms. These can be used for convention talent and help reduce overall convention costs.

As an alternate, parties can be held in one of the convention hotel breakout rooms. This also ensures that gatherings will not last longer than desired. It is also sometimes wise to advertise the duration of parties to convention attendees, such as Saturday night from 10:00 pm to midnight. The caveat of hosting parties in breakout rooms is that hotels usually specify that all food and beverage must be provided by the hotel.

The hotel reservation cut-off date should be carefully negotiated. This is the date when hotel guests must make their hotel reservations to get the discounted hotel convention room rate. Some hotels "require" cut-off dates six weeks prior to a convention. A more realistic cut-off date is four weeks before a convention.

If the day before the convention is needed for convention set-up, such as in the case where a convention may need to set a ballroom stage and theatrical equipment, set-up the dealer's room and so forth, this should be clearly stated in the hotel contract.

## **RESTAURANTS**

The hotel contract should dictate the specific hotel restaurant(s) that will be open during the convention, list their hours of operation, and guarantee that the establishments will be properly staffed. Since magicians tend to be late night people, the contract should state that at least one restaurant will be open late (up to midnight). Closing all restaurants at 9:00 pm is not acceptable for magic conventions.

The hotel should be reminded that if it will price their restaurant meals competitively as compared to outside restaurants, this will motivate attendees to eat at the hotel. At the same time, it is also great for convention registrants if there are family restaurants near the hotel. The hours of operation for restaurants must be considered, what days the restaurants will be open, and which restaurants will be open if one of the days of the convention falls on a holiday. In downtown areas, sometimes restaurants are not open on weekends.

Maps to restaurants and local attractions should be placed in convention attendee's registration packets or made available at the convention registration desk. It's a good idea to also ask restaurants to advertise in the Convention Souvenir Program. This can produce easy revenue for both the convention and restaurants.

If there is bus, trolley, or other type of mass transit available in the area that can take convention attendees to dining establishments, then schedules and information should be communicated to convention attendees as well. If hotels can also provide transportation, it is good to determine if there is a cost.

## **AUDIO-VISUAL**

Sometimes hotel contracts prohibit the use of outside audio visual and theatrical equipment. Hotels may try to dictate that only equipment from their hotel AV departments be used and that it must be rented from the hotel. Rates from hotel audio visual departments are usually exorbitant. In addition, rarely will hotel audio-visual departments have the type and extent of audio-visual services needed by a magic convention.

Magic conventions typically must bring in theatrical equipment such as sound, lights, curtains, IMAG (screens, video projectors, cameras), and stage platforms. Some performers have their own theatrical equipment that they must

use. It is important that the hotel contract specify that the magic convention can bring in and operate its own theatrical equipment. Failing this, magic conventions may be opening themselves up to thousands of dollars in exorbitant hotel AV fees.

Regular wall outlets usually do not provide enough electrical power for stage lighting and audiovisual equipment a convention might bring into a ballroom. Typically three or more electrical drops are needed, each drop being 120 VAC 20 amps. Therefore electrical drops in the ballroom area for lights and sound will probably be needed.

Sometimes conventions provide complimentary electrical drops in the ballroom. More likely than not however, a hotel will charge for their electrical drop service. Hotels can charge anywhere from \$250 per day or more for electricity. For normal everyday use, the contract should state that the convention may use at no cost the electrical wall outlets in close-up rooms and dealer's rooms.

Often a magic convention will have to use portable platforms to build the ballroom stage. Some hotels have the capability to build such stages, but hotel prices should be judged against outside platform vendors. If the hotel is to provide the portable stage platforms in the ballroom, this should be clearly delineated in the hotel contract. Hotel stage platforms must be stable with continuous surfaces and no sizeable gaps.

The ballroom stage that is typically needed measures 40 feet wide and 20 feet deep. This provides for a 24-foot stage opening with eight-foot wings on each side. When flat floor seating is used in hotel ballrooms, the platform stage should be not less than 36" tall. Strangely enough, stage platforms taller than 42" tall should not be used as well. Platforms taller than 42" inhibit front row audience members from seeing performers as they move upstage and away from the apron and proscenium.

The contract should state clearly that ballroom lighting (house lights) control must be accessible at one location near or at the audiovisual booth where the convention's stage lights, sound, and audiovisual equipment will be controlled. Sometimes ballrooms have a portable house light control box that can be run to the control area. Without it being delineated as complimentary in the contract, this can cost a convention upward to \$100 or more per day rental.

## **CONVENTION PLANNING COMPANIES**

When it comes to choosing a convention hotel and negotiating the hotel contract, the going trend is for conventions to use the services of convention planning companies. Such companies are experts in convention services and hotel negotiation. They can reduce much of the frustration, miscommunication, "red tape," and decipher flowery legal language that often occurs in hotel contracts.

Planning companies can point out hidden meanings in hotel contracts and arbitrate to save clubs hundreds of dollars in unforeseen fees. These companies usually work with conventions all the way through their event, act as a liaison between the convention and the hotel and facilitate arbitration where needed. Best of all, such companies charge conventions little or no fees for their services. Rather, it is the hotel that pays these companies a ten percent commission for each hotel room sold under the convention contract. The caveat is that hotels must generally increase their convention hotel room rates to compensate for having to pay the commissions. Also hotels usually cease negotiating with conventions when they are informed that a convention planning company will be involved in the negotiations.

If all of stipulations of convention hotel contracts seem intimidating, an alternative for a convention to consider is to rent hotel meeting areas or convention center meeting spaces outright. Such rentals are usually high, but sometimes it's the best avenue.

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