

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM TORONTO: MANAGING A MARS SOCIETY CONVENTION FROM A TO Z

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Part academic conference, part PR opportunity, part entertainment venue, part activist gathering, a Mars Society Convention is a unique event that has its defining characteristics. Moving the locale of the Mars Society Convention from Boulder to Toronto was an experiment. With all experiments there are lessons to be learned.

"Boulder is the Cradle of the Mars Society,
but one does not live in the cradle forever."
Toronto Chapter, 1999

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The annual Convention is the Mars Society's premiere event to draw in new members, discuss policy, technical, ethical and scientific issues, and showcase to the world through journalistic media the goals and commitment of the Mars Society. The first two conventions were held in Boulder, Colorado. In August 1999, the Toronto Chapter proposed to the Mars Society Board of Directors and to the Steering Committee that Toronto be the site for the 3rd convention in August 2000. The bid was accepted, and the chapter began immediately to prepare. This document is intended to serve as a guide for future Mars Society convention committees.

1.1 Acronyms Used

MS-HQ — Mars Society Headquarters in Indian Hills, Colorado.
MS — The international Mars Society
MSCon — The Mars Society Convention
LOC — Local Organizing Chapter

2.0 BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR A MARS SOCIETY CONVENTION

2.1 The structure of the convention is becoming tradition. During four days in the second week of August, from Thursday to Sunday, the members of the Mars Society gather in an academic environment such as the University of Colorado in Boulder, or Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto. All attendees convene in a hall or theatre during the

morning plenaries to listen to prominent speakers or debaters. The president opens the first morning. Four days is the minimum; in the future, more might be necessary, but that would have to be decided well in advance and only by MS-HQ. Holding the event over the weekend is a necessity, and shifting the days to another set of four, Saturday to Tuesday for instance, may seem an option but restricts the scheduling of the Steering Committee meeting and the Mars Society Banquet.

- 2.2 In the afternoons sessions there are five tracks of programming. Any attending member may submit to MS-HQ in Colorado an abstract for a talk, debate, panel discussion, presentation, or workshop. As the attendees are divided among five rooms, individual room capacities are smaller than that of the plenary hall. Prospective speakers may assume the local organizing chapter schedules speakers; as that is not the case, inquiries of that nature must be redirected to MS-HQ.
- 2.3 On the night before the convention, a period for attendees to register and pick up their registration kits must occur. Two hours should be sufficient. This is also a good time slot to train volunteers.
- 2.4 On the Friday at the Toronto convention, a press conference was held for members of the media to ask questions of prominent members of the Flashline Mars Arctic Research Station. The Toronto chapter recommends a press conference be adopted as an annual part of the convention so that the Mars Society may publicize its research projects more effectively.
- 2.5 On the Saturday, the third day of the convention, a Mars Society banquet is held. Tickets are included with regular membership and are sold separately as well. Student membership does not include the banquet ticket, but students may sign up on a waiting list for extra tickets. After the banquet meal are presentations and awards for winners of various Mars Society contests. This is followed by a "town hall" style Open Mic session where any individual can address the assembled members.
- 2.6 Saturday afternoon the Steering Committee of the Mars Society meets in a boardroom. This meeting must occur on the Saturday due to some steering committee only being available to attend on that day. The Banquet must follow the Steering Committee meeting to allow the president to report back to the membership at the Banquet decisions made during the meeting. The first two conventions held the banquet in the plenary hall; the 3rd convention held the banquet off site at a local hotel.
- 2.7 Free public events on the first night of the convention are typically held. The second night may or may not have free public events as well. These will need to be sufficiently publicized in local media.

2.8 Space for exhibits, merchants, and sponsors' tables must be available throughout the convention.

2.9 On the final day of the convention there is a closing plenary in the main hall for all attendees. The convention closes in the late afternoon, with the closing plenary beginning about 5pm.

3.0 HOW A CHAPTER CAN BID TO HOST A MS CONVENTION

The Toronto bid was proposed before the Board of Directors and the Steering Committee of the Mars Society at the 2nd annual convention. The bidding chapter has to present strong points for hosting the MSCon in their city. A strong bid would be indicated by the potential of attracting many new members from within an area with a large population base. The capacity of prospective facilities to host the convention is a major concern—suggestions for facilities with adequate space for the plenary hall, track rooms, boardroom, exhibit hall and banquet hall must be made. An interview room would be an additional consideration. Proximity to numerous local offices of major and minor media organizations would be an incentive.

4.0 RESPONSIBILITIES: THE LOCAL ORGANIZING CHAPTER AND MS-HQ

4.1 The LOC is responsible for acquiring facilities and managing logistics.

4.2 The LOC should define roles and specific tasks so that there are not multiple people working at cross-purposes. Intra-chapter communications must be such that it allows one to take up another's task if the person responsible needs time away from duties, cannot continue, loses interest, or needs help. Logistics to be managed include coordinating volunteers, directing media inquiries and interview requests, and negotiations with groups outside the chapter. In a large chapter, it is recommended task teams of a maximum five people be responsible for performing a task (such as PR) and regularly reporting back to the whole LOC its progress.

4.3 MS-HQ is responsible for all issues regarding scheduling of content, including accepting abstracts and approving speakers.

4.4 The LOC is responsible for exhibit hall, including approval of exhibits, booths, displays, and vendors. Concern must be given to accepting only vendors that sell tasteful and appropriate items. Groups that wish to recruit new members will have to pay for their booth. Displays and exhibits that are primarily for educational purposes are allowed in the exhibit hall free.

- 4.5 The LOC is responsible for printing up the program books, the session schedule, the venue room map, and all other items to be included in the registration kit as directed by MS-HQ.
- 4.6 The LOC is responsible for promotion of the conference, both locally and working through other MS members abroad. Expect to be interviewed by print and broadcast media, both before and during the conference.
- 4.7 MS-HQ wants to be briefed about convention plans, and involved in major decisions requiring financial resources. Minor decisions involving relatively small sums of money may be made by the LOC. In other words, don't bother Maggie about the color of the napkins.
- 4.8 The convention Registration Kit requires the following:
- Abstract/program book
 - Session timetable
 - Donor form
 - Advertisement inserts

5.0 OBTAINING THE CONVENTION FACILITIES

- 5.1 Some university conference services departments are cooperative, and some are not. Some have arcane rules that require a conference be sponsored by a department of the university, and therefore be entirely academic in nature, and some do not. As the Mars Society Convention is not solely academic, and cannot pigeonhole itself under one field of discussion, some universities will not allow the MSCon to be hosted on their campus.
- 5.2 It is highly recommended that only one person in the LOC be the liaison with the hosting facility in negotiation of the contract. If MS-HQ has questions or want changes to be made to the contract, we recommend the liaison be involved. MS-HQ should clearly define what the LOC is expected to obtain and allow the LOC liaison the sole responsibility to do so. This is to avoid misunderstandings that might crop up in long-distance negotiations.
- 5.3 We recommend the LOC be given a budget a year before the convention to acquire the basic facility and ensure on-time payments.
- 5.4 A contract is likely to require changes. We recommend discussions begin on the labor charges before the contract is signed, with an attempt to negotiate the use of competent volunteers trained in the use of audio-visual equipment, ushering, and room set-up. If a stage set is used, as in Toronto, it is desirable that trained volunteers be allowed to do the set construction.

5.5 A student or faculty member of the hosting university may be able to obtain for free the use of AV equipment. It is desirable to recruit such an individual to the LOC.

6.0 PROMOTING THE CONVENTION

6.1 Once the conference facility has been selected, the MSCon must be promoted. The sooner the public learns about the MS Convention, the better able they are to plan their vacation schedules to attend.

6.2 The Poster Contest—As soon as the facilities have been selected and the contract officially signed, the poster contest should be announced. Ideally this would be about early October in the year before the convention. By early December entries for the poster contest should be received and a winning poster selected. By January posters should be printed for distribution to the chapters. We recommend a set be produced within Canada for distribution to Canadian chapters, and a set produced in the U.S. for distribution to American chapters. This would avoid cross-border courier fees. The poster should be available on the Mars Society website for downloading by any chapter or individual in the world. Permission from the poster designer for use of the design on items other than the poster, like a convention T-shirt, must be obtained as a condition of the contest.

6.3 The Media—Working relationships with journalists of many media organizations are advantageous to both parties. Journalists are more inclined to cover an event if they are familiar with the people involved. News organizations typically receive hundreds of press releases every day. They tend to prefer receiving these as faxes. Following up with a personal phone call is essential. With that, they may ask to be retransmitted the fax so they actually read it next time. Media professional can attend the convention free. Providing them with convention media kits is a good idea. A press conference held at the convention regarding the current Mars Society project (such as the FMARS inauguration in 2000) might make it to the 6 o'clock News. Media personnel may need delicate handling. They will seek to schedule through the LOC interviews with noteworthy convention speakers.

6.4 Other Chapters and Other Societies—The membership of the Mars Society are typically eager to help promote the conference by putting up posters or handing out flyers in their regions. Other space advocacy societies like SEDS and the Planetary Society are allied in goals and may help to promote the convention. Word of mouth promotion is significant.

7.0 CONVENTION POLICIES

It is highly desirable to have a written set of policies regarding the convention issued by MS-HQ. Particular areas to define are: the basic structure of a MS Convention and in what areas a LOC may innovate; the roles of the LOC and MS-HQ and how they must interact; a policy on day passes; a policy on attendance; a policy on decision authority; a policy on the relative importance of competing goals, such as whether increasing the attendance is more important than increasing generated revenue.

The steps towards a human mission to Mars requires the Mars Society initiate expensive projects like the current FMARS, the Analog Rover, and future robotic missions. The fees generated at a convention cannot be the primary financial support for these projects. In order to pay for future projects the Mars Society needs to increase public and private support. Corporate sponsorship is the major financial source for funding projects. Funds generated by a Mars Society Convention were important for supporting the creation of the Society, but fade in importance now. Those funds cannot account for a major fraction of the budget for FMARS. Increasing the appeal to corporate sponsors of supporting the Society financially has little to do with how many members of the Mars Society exist, but rather how an MS project supports the corporate sponsor's marketability. Therefore, the percentage profit generated by an MS Convention need not be so high. The convention fees could be lower, even if the convention expenses increased substantially.

In 2000 the convention fees were raised over the previous year. If increasing attendance is important, then convention fees could be lower to encourage more people to attend, or day passes could be allowed and actively promoted. Day passes are available by special request, but are not currently promoted, in order to encourage people to attend all four days of the convention. This suggests generating revenue is more important than increasing attendance. But actively promoting day passes would both increase attendance and increase revenue, as many people are simply not interested in attending four days or cannot do so, due to their job or because they are unable to afford the fee. It is the policy of MS-HQ not to be vigilant in ensuring attendees wear their badges or actually are registered. This suggests generating revenue is less important than increasing attendance. That contradicts the reason for not promoting day passes. MS-HQ must sort out these policies formally rather than on an ad-hoc basis. What was good for founding the Mars Society is not necessarily good for continuing it.

In order of highest to lowest priority, the goals of the MSCon should be:

- Convene active members for the discussion of direction, strategy, and goals of the Mars Society
- Provide a venue for developing the projects of the Mars Society
- Provide a venue for discussion of topics relevant to Mars science and exploration.
- Recruit new members to the Mars Society
- Attract media attention
- Generate funds for the Mars Society

8.0 CONVENTION TASK FORCE

Establishment of a permanent Conference Task Force to handle society wide issues, like the poster contest, conference promotion, speaker and track organization (including perhaps a conference theme), and anything else that does not need to be handled at the conference locality is recommended by the Toronto chapter. Many in Toronto feel we've learned a lot of lessons in organizing this thing and we don't want to have the next conference team to have to relearn everything from scratch; therefore Toronto chapter members are willing to sit as advisors on a Conference Task Force. Every chapter to host a MSCon should have some of its members eventually sit on the Convention Task Force.

Designing track programming and soliciting for papers on specific themes would allow for better promotion of the convention and a more cohesive structure to it. New members are more likely to join if they can see the convention programming well in advance. A Convention Task Force doing such programming on an annual basis could advance the Society's scientific and promotional goals.

9.0 FUTURE CONVENTIONS

Two years may be necessary to fully prepare for a convention. Toronto chapter recommends the facilities be booked a minimum of one year before the convention, and advance planning on strategy and goals be conducted before that. The first year should be for thought and research; the second year for action and reaction. Of course, no battle plan survives contact with the enemy. Make sure to send several people from your LOC to volunteer behind the scenes at the convention held in the previous year to the convention for which you are bidding. Develop a working relationship with MS-HQ.

10.0 CONVENTION CHAOS

10.1 Communications at the convention between LOC members and other volunteers would be greatly enhanced by the use of two-way radios with private channels. Having one person in charge of volunteers handling audio-visual support would be beneficial to the smooth running of the convention.

10.2 A cell phone "hot line" number was very useful at the 3rd convention for speakers and media to contact the convention organizers for questions and requests for aid.

10.3 Having the speakers register by 11am of the day they are to give a talk is necessary to keep track of gaps in the conference schedule. At the 2000 conference in one of the tracks of 8 speakers only 3 showed up to do their talks. This caused confusion and

people were upset because they could have gone to see another speaker that was there. A short biographical paragraph about the speaker would be nice to have for the abstract book.

10.4 Allowing for 5 minutes between speakers will let people travel between tracks if rooms are on opposite ends of the campus. Sorting out scheduling will have to be done with MS-HQ.

10.5 About 30 volunteers will be needed; about 10 to 15 from the LOC, the rest will come from other Mars Society chapters. The recommended minimum volunteers is as follows:

- A volunteers coordinator
- A registration desk captain, plus two registration desk helpers
- Track room ushers/timers, 2 per room
- Relievers for each position
- Miscellaneous Gofers

10.6 In the last month before the convention, expect a minimum of 3 people to be spending 20 hours a week organizing the convention, and an additional 5 people spending 10 hours a week.

11.0 SUMMARY

Have fun, use your head, keep communications open, surround yourself with competent people and avoid making your task more stressful than it needs to be.