Attended Basics: Survival Guide for Patrons, Customers, Guests, and Goers

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Attendee Basics: Survival Guide for Patrons, Customers, Guests, and Goers

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This article is part of a series of book excerpts The Pop Culture Business Handbook for Cons and Festivals, which provides the business, strategy, and legal reference guide for fan conventions, film festivals, musical festivals, and cultural events.

Cons use a range of labels for the people who attend the event as paid ticket holders. Whether the people are labeled attendees, patrons, guests, concert-goers, or customers, many of the chapters of this book identify how the Con organizers address these differing ticket holders and should plan and prepare to assure each group has a safe, fun, and memorable experience. This chapter focuses on the attendees and what they should do to hold up their side of the equation to assure themselves that they have the kind of experience they desire.

The relationship between the Con and its customers is akin to a partnership. Customers should be able to expect the Con to deliver on its promises and hopefully to exceed them. Similarly, the Con will be most effective when the attendees do what is expected. As discussed below, purchasing tickets on time, treating other attendees with respect, following directions to attend programs, and engaging in cosplay with both fun and safety in mind will all help make the Con successful. When the guest and the Con work together, then the event is at its best.

Attendees should also consider what their goals are for attending a Con. Attending the most famous events may be a point of pride and a personal achievement to check off their bucket lists. The largest of these events are also incredibly crowded, and seats for the top panels within those events are hard to get. Smaller events will often provide much greater access to the headline panels and attractions. In addition to planning how to attend a particular event, fans should consider whether attending a combination of events will better meet their goals. Some fans will have a better experience by attending a variety of Cons to achieve the balance of the programs and experiences they seek.

A. Planning the Trip

The planning to attend a Con will depend on the distance to travel, the availability of the tickets, the size of the group attending, and the goals for attending. There are a number of Cons that commonly are on people’s bucket lists. San Diego Comic-Con, the Sundance Film Festival, South by Southwest, Burning Man, and similar events are so iconic that people spend years thinking about these events and months planning. For some locals, in contrast, these same bucket list events are a ten-minute ride away and special tickets are easy to obtain.

Travel. For the iconic Con travel adventure, the basic planning requires event tickets, hotel or other accommodations, transportation, and a strategy to successfully navigate the Con. The attendee should have a budget for each of these items as well as for food, local transportation, and on-site purchases. Each person’s budget must be enough to support that person’s plan. At the same time,

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scripping on the Con to pay for the plane ticket can result in a very unsatisfactory experience. Realistic budgeting is the essential first step to ensure a successful Con experience.

**Housing.** Because hotels generally offer reservations with generous cancellation policies, hotels are the most flexible of the major expenses, so hotel rooms should be reserved the furthest in advance. Often, the destination Cons will partner with the nearby hotels to reserve rooms at pre-arranged prices for the benefit of the attendees. There will be many other hotels that have rooms outside these blocks. An attendee should reserve a room with a cancelable reservation well in advance of the event. If rooms closer to the venue or rooms that are less expensive become available, then the first reservation can be cancelled. If instead, there are no hotel rooms at the closer facilities, at least the early room reservation will assure the attendee that there is some place to stay.

**Tickets.** If the event does not sell out, then acquiring tickets is not a problem, but the premiere Cons have tickets that are more difficult to acquire. Some events have lottery systems. Others sell tickets based on premium packages. Although these packages can become expensive, the attendee should consider the overall cost of the event. For some attendees, a ten percent premium for an all-event pass may be a very worthwhile investment, given the cost of travel, hotel, food, and merchandise. In contrast, a one-day pass is more than sufficient for a day trip to a local event. There is no “right way” to attend the Con. The important thing for the attendee is that the planning meets the expectations.

**Transportation.** Transportation need only be booked a few weeks in advance. Flight costs will rise dramatically if left until the last minute, but there is no savings in booking three months in advance instead of one month in advance, and life has a way of upsetting long-range plans, so non-refundable expenses should be budgeted but not ticketed unduly early. Ground transportation also should be planned in advance. Parking is very difficult to find at some locations, but it may be free and convenient at other sites. Public transportation is often an excellent alternative, but public systems can be overburdened during large events. This applies to taxi systems, Uber, and Lyft as well. When planning ground transportation, allowing for wait times is also essential.

**Cosplay.** Another important aspect for attendees to consider is whether the attendee will participate in significant cosplay. If the attendance includes cosplay, then the time and expense to create the costume should be part of the attendees’ budgeting and planning. Even a simple costume idea will invariably require additional time and some unbudgeted props or materials to complete the costume. If the cosplay is part of a group cosplay, then the schedule and shared expenses should also be added to the planning. Building these costumes is part of the whole experience and can be an important part of the overall event.

**Group Attendance.** If the attendee is traveling in a group or party, then coordination among the group is also important. To make the best of the experience, the expectations of each group member must be made clear in advance, and the group members should negotiate the necessary compromises. Where group members have differing expectations at the Con, there is likely to be a conflict over the planning aspect. For example, if half the group is planning to spend for an expensive five-star hotel, top restaurants, premium post-parties, and a lot of merchandise while the other part of the group is scraping by at an out-of-town hotel, a Greyhound bus, and camping out in one of the conference halls, the group is likely to have difficulties and experience conflict. Even in this example, however, the group can plan an accommodating agenda so each faction can have its own experiences while allowing the group to share a common experience or two. If instead, one faction insists the other faction to follow its agenda, the ensuing dynamics will ruin the experience for some or all of the group.
B. Planning the Day

Some events have a single focal point for all attendees such as a headliner band or keynote panel, while more typical Cons offer many different experiences to many different attendees. It is important for an attendee to develop and execute an actual game plan in order to engage the various activities at the Con. Using a comic book convention as an example, the schedule for the day should take the following items into account:

- Cosplay, costuming, and makeup in advance of the event
- Cosplay, costuming, and makeup on the day of the event
- Travel time to the Con
- Parking and walking time to convention center
- Badge acquisition
- Meals and drinks
- Finding desired panels
- Lines and waits to attend specific panels
- Competing for limited edition items being sold in the exhibit hall and general exhibit hall exploration
- Lines for autographs
- Walking time back to parking
- Opportunities for neighboring programs and events
- Travel time home
- Repeat for each day

The list is not exhaustive, but it is exhausting. The logistical planning usually begins with parking, but if there are significant costume issues or travel times, then even getting into the car will have some challenges. Provide sufficient time so that there is a safe buffer to arrive at the Con in time to participate in the key events. Look up the time when badge distribution starts. Have the necessary photo IDs and matching credit cards for will call. Print or download tickets in advance and be ready to help move through lines quickly.

Since it is an inevitable part of the Con experience, attendees should decide in advance if there are key elements of the Con that are essential to the visit. The schedule should be built to assure the key elements are achieved. Even with this advance planning, however, attendees are better off providing for some flexibility, since many events restrict attendance and there can be a multitude of scheduling conflicts or inordinate waits to get into the most popular halls.

When traveling as a group, be sure to have some pre-arranged locations at which to meet if the members of the group become separated. Attendees may also consider scheduling specific times for the group to reconvene, so that members of the group have opportunities to do their own exploring before returning to any centrally-planned schedules.

Panels often fill up at the larger Cons, so scheduling often requires lining up for one or more panels in advance of the one the attendee identified as the most important. That means a great deal
of waiting in line. Time spent waiting in line will limit time spent elsewhere, so realistic time budgeting is essential.

The largest of the events also tend to spill over into programs by neighboring organizations. Fandoms that could not get into the main event might be hosting panels, screenings, parties, and other events nearby. Game competitions and open play may be happening at nearby retailers. These related events allow attendees who do not have badges good for every day to continue to participate in a part of the Con experience on days without a badge, as well as to vary the kind of activities.

Attendees should make the most of their time in line. Socialize with the others in line, take pictures, have food and water, and otherwise use the time to make the Con interesting. By engaging with the Con and other attendees during the lines, the entire experience becomes more social and more interesting.

C. Basic Necessities

To succeed in making the Con a memorable event, there are simple steps that can improve the experience. The attendees’ most important planning step is to understand the rules of the venue. Each event will have its own rules about what can be carried into the facility. By reading those rules in advance and following them, the attendees will not be wasting time returning barred items to the car and becoming frustrated by seemingly arbitrary rules.

One rule is universal for all Cons: attendees will spend hours walking and standing. Therefore, comfortable and supportive shoes are essential to maintaining endurance and overall comfort throughout the event. If the attendee plans to be in costume, then design the costume carefully to allow for good footwear.

This general advice goes for the attendees’ entire costume. If the costume takes two people and 75 minutes to put on, then bathroom breaks are going to be a scheduling challenge. Cosplayers should try to design costumes to be conveniently put on and taken off. In addition, attendees should be sure to have a change of clothes in case of wardrobe issues or costume problems.

Beyond footwear, other important considerations include water, nutrition, and bathroom breaks. Most convention centers have drinking fountains, so carrying a refillable sports bottle serves to cut costs and assure good hydration for the duration of the event. Hydration also reduces fatigue.

Since most of the food choices at convention halls are an unhealthy mix of carbs and fats, health-focused attendees should also bring healthier food and snacks or plan to leave the Con for nearby restaurants. Some venues offer a variety of improved food options, but those with better food often have long lines and full tables. However, there are some attendees who are comfortable taking the time to enjoy the food while others will feel frustrated at the wait. Know the personalities of the members of the group and plan the food scheduling accordingly.

Power will also be a challenge. Even phones with long battery life may be challenged if they are being used for thousands of photographs, social media, and to kill time during the long wait in lines. Attendees should bring back-up power supplies, spare batteries if the technology allows, and chargers with extension cords for the occasional chance to be near a wall outlet. A generous attendee with a multi-socket extension cord will soon become the most popular person in any line.

Finally, attendees need to compare their logistics with their budgets. Attendees should have enough money to get through their planned agenda plus a contingency for unforeseen emergencies and opportunities. The money should be carried in the form of both cash and credit cards. Virtually
all vendors take credit cards or other forms of electronic payment, but some venues struggle with Internet service during large Cons. In addition, some autograph lines may still be cash only. Having both cash and credit cards available will add flexibility when making purchases. Some vendors will prefer cash and may give a small discount. Others will be electronic-only because they do not want the problems associated with managing change.

**D. Be Respectful**

The appropriate conduct for social interaction at Cons and other events has become more of a challenge in recent years. Dressing in a villain’s costume does not create a license to treat other attendees, volunteers, or staff badly. Neither does being tired and dehydrated or being stuck in long lines. Those are the costs of attendance at large events.

Attendees must respect everyone who attends an event. The audacity, technical skill or outrageousness of a costume does not translate into an invitation to touch, fondle, caress, or harass another attendee. Anyone who feels like they are the target of such inappropriate behavior should seek out a staff member immediately.

While dressing in costume in public generally invites photographs, common courtesy is still to ask someone’s permission before taking their photograph, particularly if the photographer is asking someone in cosplay to join with others for the photograph. Asking permission improves the experience for the person being photographed, enhances the interaction among the group, and sets a more positive tone.

**E. Event Strategies**

As noted in prior chapters, Cons are often organized and may best be understood as quest adventures. Attendees will have the most rewarding experiences at Cons if they consider their own participation as something of a quest. There are people to meet at every stage of the travel process as well as at the Con itself. There are often great opportunities to take pictures, share with others on social media, and be part of the overall experience.

Time is the universal frame of reference for the Con experience. Each day begins, runs, and ends. If an attendee decides to spend three hours in a series of panels, that time cannot be spent in the exhibit hall. If one is a gamer, then the time spent watching and playing games will replace time spent photographing cosplay. Each such choice is reasonable. What makes Con attendance successful is understanding how to make the most out of the time spent on the various experience while maximizing the opportunity to engage in those experiences most important to the attendee. Success also means avoiding failure. Since getting sick, sore feet, or lost frustrates these goals, attendees need to follow the recommendations to avoid these pitfalls.

Attendees should first schedule the most important parts of their experience and then fill in the rest of their plans accordingly. Without a prepared plan, it may be hard even to make it out of the exhibit hall. If an attendee has a limit on the number of hours that can be spent in line, then that attendee should prioritize less well-known panels. Often, these programs are just as interesting as the main attractions and the more intimate setting results in a great audience experience.

Attendees should also understand that there is a high degree of chaos in many Cons. Schedules will change, weather will not cooperate, equipment will break, and the unwanted will occur. By adding some flexibility and some resiliency, the attendee will be able to make that another experience at the Con rather than a frustration that destroys the event.
Increasingly, Cons use social media and apps to update the attendees on the changes to the schedule to alert the public about upcoming issues or opportunities. At the same time, both the Con organizers and the attendees should be mindful to review the privacy settings and the terms of use policies associated with the app.

Many apps add great convenience and efficiency. Others, however, may take unwanted liberties with the users’ data, location information, and even the photos stored on the phone. Careful selection of apps will provide a wealth of useful tools without creating the risk of unwanted public disclosure of personal data. By utilizing thoughtfully-selected tools, attendees can navigate the updates and ensure that the experience is as positive as possible.