



Regional
Conference
Planning
Guide



The Regional Conference

The regional conference is a way to promote SPJ's service to the profession and to give journalists in each of the regions a forum for exchanging ideas and solving problems. The spring conference should be enjoyable, informative, a way to promote chapter unity and strength, and a recruitment tool for membership.

Here are some tried-and-true techniques for making it a positive experience:

- Plan early and carefully.
- Delegate responsibilities to good people.
- Budget carefully.
- Carry through, both on projects and with people.

The Regional Director is the legal representative of SPJ in your region. Therefore, he or she does have the final authority over the regional conference. You should not sign any contracts without his approval or authorize major expenditures. The Regional Director will also arbitrate any disputes that will arise during the planning and execution of the conference. The Regional Director and host chapter need to work out the allocation of profits from the conference. You all may choose to apply a percentage of the conference proceeds to any of the following: host chapter account; regional fund; SPJ Legal Defense Fund; or other accounts.

THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is provided as a roadmap of sorts to aid in planning a regional conference. It is in no way a be all end all and doesn't include everything involved in the undertaking of hosting or planning a regional conference. This handbook is presented in a loose-leaf format for a reason – nothing is set in stone. Pages and sections can easily be inserted, deleted and appended during the process. Remember to take notes and place copies of those notes, ideas and possibilities in this handbook. Ideally you'll hand this handbook off to your successor and any insight (no matter how small or how large) can only help to simplify or clarify this task for the next person. We would also appreciate any ideas or suggestions you might have. Your experiences, suggestions and insight can be forwarded to chairs and directors in the other SPJ regions. After all, this is an educational process and the more we can learn the better. After your regional conference, any comments or corrections you would like to make concerning the contents of this booklet would be greatly appreciated.

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Congratulations!

You are the lucky person tasked with chairing a regional conference for the Society of Professional Journalists. Before you go any further in planning the conference, there are a few immediate steps that must be taken if this effort is going to be a success:

As chairperson, you are the conference coordinator. You must be able to work well with a variety of people, sometimes all at the same time. The “paperwork” in this job can be staggering, especially all the emails to chapter presidents, media outlets for financial help, and arranging for and confirming speakers.

However, surviving a regional conference is not too difficult. In fact, it can be fun. I do hope you are reading this at least 9-12 months ahead of time so you have plenty of time to develop your plans completely.

Just read this handbook first, keep it for reference, dig in and get going. Your conference will be here before you know it.

Don't try to carry the weight alone.

- **Consult your regional director early and often.** He or she likely has been through one or more of these meetings. RDs can tell you what to expect for attendance, help attract speakers, coordinate with national headquarters, and supervise the Mark of Excellence contest. He or she can also help establish and assist in watching over the all-important budget.

The regional director, as SPJ's legal representative in the region, has final authority over the regional conference. He or she should be consulted about sites and major expenditures, and should arbitrate any disputes.

- **Get the support of your employer, co-workers and family** After family, you need the support of your employer. If you cannot get the support of your family and your employer, it would be wise at this point for you to turn the chair's responsibilities over to another person. As the conference gets closer, more of your time will be required to deal with logistics. The rest of this handbook will try to explain the many details you must organize and plan.

Planning

First things first

Use part of each regional meeting (generally held annually during the SPJ Convention) to talk about next year's regional conference. Pick sites as many years in advance as possible. Determine host chapters and, if possible, find someone to chair each succeeding conference.

For your own reference, keep detailed records of your planning. You may want to do this in a binder, or by using a folder organization system in your email. This will become your go-to guide over the next several months, so keep all telephone numbers, addresses, dates and other information in it.

The early bird had the right idea

Early and careful planning will result in a successful conference. As you begin to think about regional conferences, formulate the basic goal of your meeting. Why are you hosting a regional conference? You may feel that your primary reason is to provide professional development opportunities or you may want to focus on providing an open forum for topics applicable to your participants. You may choose to develop a program that allows for a great deal of interaction among your participants or you may choose to have a structured program of formal presentations. The choice is yours. However, adhere to your goal as you prepare each aspect of the conference.

After you have determined your goal with the help of other chapter members, you need to select specific chair people to assist you.

Delegate Responsibility

The best thing you can do first is to develop a “core group,” who are dedicated, loyal and insane enough to want to work on the conference. The number of people in the core group may vary, but it’s best to keep that group fairly concise. These people should be selected for their ability to work together and the probability they will still be in your area at conference. They must also be dependable. Assign duties to each member. Be specific.

In other words, don’t just pick someone because they are a friend. Select people who you know are reliable.

At the very beginning of the planning process be clear about who is the final decision maker. Conflicts will inevitably arise, and it’s necessary to have a clear line of authority in place from the very beginning.

As chairperson, remember, you are working with these people. Do not give them a major assignment, such as developing the program, and expect them to do it all. The conference is a team effort, but the chairperson must know what is happening at all times. In addition to the conference chairperson, consider these appointments:

Suggested Chairs (in addition to the overall conference chair)

- Finance/Budget
- Professional Development (session & speakers)
- Publicity/Marketing
- Fundraising

Conference Chair

Responsible for overall oversight of conference planning. Oversee the activities of all conference committee chairs. Primary hotel or venue contact.

Finance/Budget Chair

The finance chair is responsible for the financial management of your conference. Setting up the conference account and helping assure the conference operates at or below budget. The finance chair should open a separate conference account. Though the conference may ultimately realize a profit, it is wise NOT to run the conference through the chapter accounts.

Professional Development Chair

The program chair works closely with the overall conference chair and the regional director and shares the brunt of determining the program and inviting speakers.

Publicity/Marketing Chair

The publicity/marketing chair works to ensure that all journalists and students in the area know about the conference in a timely manner. This person will develop mailing lists, marketing materials, news releases, email announcements, and other resources to promote the upcoming conference. The person will develop timelines and ensure that materials are delivered in given timeframes.

Fundraising Chair

The fundraising chair plans and oversees efforts to raise sponsorship dollars and in-kind donations for the conference. He or she also may be responsible for securing items from the host city. This person should work closely with the overall conference chair and the finance/budget chair.

Getting from point A to point Z

Determine the length of the conference

One thing in the initial planning stage that should be addressed: how long do you want the conference to run and why? What should the hours be?

Some have found that a regional conference only needs to last a day unless you have a writer's workshop or some other major event tied to it. A Saturday usually works best because pros and students find it easier to attend on a weekend than on a weekday.

Set a date

At the first meeting, check the calendar and select your conference dates. Spring conferences are usually held any weekend from the **last weekend in March to late April. Some conferences take place in early May and that is fine, too! Just be aware that going too late in May can reduce student attendance, if that is an important group for you, as the schools are done of the summer.** If you hold your regional conference too early in March, there is a chance regional MOE Award results will not be available. Be sure to check a religious date calendar so the conference does not conflict with Easter, Passover or other special days. Also, check with your college and professional chapters and other media organizations to avoid conflicts with conventions, workshops, spring break or finals.

Select a facility (see PHYSICAL FACILITIES)

If there are only one or two hotels in your area, you won't have to worry much about selecting a hotel. But, if you are in a metropolitan area, the first assignment to your core group should be to check out the hotels/ locations for your meeting. Don't get stuck on hosting at a hotel. There are usually plenty of other options in each city! Look at university spaces, historic buildings, stand-alone conference centers, etc.

Develop the program (see PROGRAM)

After selecting the meeting dates and location, it is time to select a theme, if that has not already been done. Not every conference uses a theme, but it is easier to coordinate the conference around a central idea. Publicize your theme in all conference materials, including brochures and registration forms.

Financial Management

Money, Money, Money

Let your budget be your guide

The budgeting process will make or break your conference. This statement may seem extreme, but it is valid. If you estimate expenses too low or revenue too high, you will see your conference spill over budget. The difference will have to be drawn from conference participants, spoiling their experience, or from your chapter's financial resources, depleting funds your chapter had designated for other projects. Keep as a cardinal rule in budgeting - estimate expenses high and revenue low.

The Regional Director can estimate the number of people who will attend the conference based on past experience. Unless your conference features a celebrity speaker or special event, the number who attends should not vary greatly from previous years.

The Regional Director also can put you in touch with previous conference hosts who can tell you costs from past years. This should not vary greatly, unless the previous host city has a notable higher cost of living. There is "insurance" in adding 10 percent to your estimates to cover inflation.

Use all those previous costs and attendance numbers as guidelines. Then survey potential meeting sites, hotels and motels with meeting rooms, and university facilities.

The Regional Director should also work with the host chapter to determine the allocation of conference profits, if any. Decide the profit question up front. Different regions do things different ways, and that's fine. Some Regional Directors insist that profits, if any, go to their regional fund. Others give it back to the host chapter. Some split the difference. Whichever way you and your group want, make sure it is understood and agreed to in advance.

Prepare a budget

When preparing the conference budget, the finance chair should consider:

- Length of the conference, number of meals and registrants.
- Lower registration fees for students, higher fees for non-members and breakout fees for individual events, like meals.
- Speaker travel and accommodations. (Will you be covering these expenses)?
- Will you be offering complimentary meals and registrations for speakers and other VIPs?
- Audio-visual needs and Internet charges.
- Printing and postage for promotion, programs and registration materials.
- Don't forget to factor in taxes and services charged at your venue(s). Taxes and service charges can add in the neighborhood of 30% to your final bill.

Include in your budget "extra" items such as conference favors, specialized nametags and others. Remember that these items are extras, and they will be the first items cut if you find yourself running over budget.

Once you determine your expenses, you will be able to determine your registration fee. Set the fee high enough to cover your expenses but not so high that you discourage attendance. Attempt to raise enough revenue to cover the expenses of several prominent speakers. Prominent speakers will often times draw a larger crowd, more than compensating for their expenses. Most speakers will come if their expenses are paid. Do not offer an honorarium.

Be sure tax and gratuity are included in prices provided by hotel and in the prices you advertise to the participants. Tax and gratuity can be a budget killer, if not properly budgeted for. Conference locations/ hotels may charge anywhere from 18-24% in service charge. Tax rates vary by state/city.

As your conference draws nearer and your attendance figures begin to solidify, you need to determine a meal count and adjust your budget accordingly. Do not get yourself in the position of paying for meals you do not need. Also in dealing with a caterer, get the best "drop-dead" date you can. It can be as close as three days before your meal function if you do it right.

Miscellaneous Items

In most places, there is also a daily hotel parking fee (including an in-and-out charge). In some cities (i.e., New York) this can get pretty hefty. This cost would affect both conference attendees and the regional conference committee.

Sponsors

When the financial estimates begin coming in, where do you turn for money? After all, a conference cannot simply be run on good intentions with no funds. Perhaps the best place to look is your own back yard. It would be a good idea to make a list of all the media outlets in your area, complete with mailing/email addresses and managing editors' or station managers' names.

Next, contact the managing editor or station manager. If you know them, contact them directly by phone, and follow up with a letter and/or email. Explain the local chapter is hosting the next spring conference and wouldn't they like to contribute to the cause? As a point of reference, names of employees who are local members might be included in the letter. If no local members work at that outlet, send a brochure (available through national) and membership forms. It is surprising how many places have never heard of SPJ, but whose employees join after they hear about the conference.

Sponsors may be obtained for meals and coffee breaks. Printed programs and hospitality rooms also are other excellent possibilities for donations. It's always best to seek media-related organizations as sponsors. The test: Don't accept sponsors if there's any hint they're interested only because it's a media event and are providing something they wouldn't provide a non-media conference. SPJ's current sponsorship policy is included in the appendix to this guide.

In obtaining sponsors, ask them to pick up the entire tab for an event, regardless of how many attend. Or, ask them to agree to pay for all members and official guests. (Be careful not to create any conflicts of interest, though.)

Invite the sponsor of an event to the entire conference. You will want to reserve a place for the sponsors at the banquet and recognize them in your program.

A very wise move would be for you to place these financial requests early. September or October of the previous year is not too early to send out those letters. In many cases, if the paper or station doesn't have the request by the first of the calendar year, the funds will all be budgeted elsewhere and they will not be able to contribute. When approaching a media company for support, it is generally easier if a member who works for the company opens the path for you. They should be talking the conference up to their editors and station managers well in advance of someone approaching them for sponsorship support.

Foundations and grants

Perhaps the best place to find large sums of money is through foundations or grants. Check with your Regional Director concerning available national foundations and national or local grants specifically set aside for journalistic endeavors.

National SPJ Resources

SPJ frequently offers regional conference grants. Inquire with the national office about the availability of funds and the application process. The availability of these grants is not guaranteed year-to-year.

How about the registration fee?

The registration fee should include the costs of all meals provided by the conference. (Be sure to include the cost for tax/gratuity and any AV used at the meal when figuring the meal price). When setting fees, establish a member rate and a nonmember rate. Make clear in the conference promotions that SPJ members receive a discounted rate to attend the conference.

Late registrations should include a late fee. Not only are you going to do more paperwork for last-minute registrants, you'll also may have to make last-minute adjustments with the hotel and caterers.

Students appreciate low fees and every effort should be made to charge them as little as possible. Members should be told early what the fee will be. Even an estimate will be helpful to them.

Fees should be collected in advance. A person who pays his fee in advance is less apt to change plans. You should set a cutoff date for refunds and print this date in all your promotional materials. Require those requesting a refund to submit their request in writing. A person also may delay sending in his advance registration until the last minute. This will make it difficult to estimate attendance.

Refunds

Determine a refund policy early on and make it known in any promotional items. Some regions have a policy of no refunds, feeling the region has to spend money upfront and that was part of the game.

Watch the budget carefully

Most chapter officers don't understand that something as simple as coffee at a hotel/conference center can cost \$50+ per gallon and that a flipchart can cost \$50 to rent. **Make sure your conference location knows only certain people are authorized to approve expenses, and make sure you know what is being approved. It's a bad idea for too many people to have authority to add things during the event.** A well planned conference can wind up losing money at the last minute if you don't watch this carefully. The national office is happy to review your hotel contracts before you sign them.

Physical Facilities

The need for reserving accommodations — dining, meeting, hospitality and sleeping facilities — as early as possible, even years ahead in some cities, requires no explanation.

If possible, all functions, except for special events, should be in one location.

In preparation for site selection, create a detailed conference schedule and outline of what you will need to make your conference happen.

Select a Site

If there are only one or two hotels in your area, you won't have to worry much about selecting a hotel. But, if you are in a metropolitan area, the first assignment to your core group should be to check out the hotels/ other locations for your meeting.

Different hotels offer different services. The most important things to check when talking to a hotel sales staff are: conference and sleeping room prices; size of meeting rooms, dining facilities and menus; audio visual costs; availability and cost of parking; and proximity to local nightlife or special events for after conference hours. Be careful when setting up a block of overnight rooms at a hotel. Know and understand any room night commitment.

Make sure to compare prices and accommodations on the various hotel packages. It will take a little more time, but the cost savings will be well worth the effort. It doesn't have to be a hotel. Many universities and community colleges provide beautiful facilities at very reasonable rates. A lot of these schools have conference centers or media centers and catering facilities that can knock your socks off. And, they often have hotels on campus. Successful conferences have been held in the past at historic sites in the host city and at community centers that offer multiple rooms for rent and catering.

Work with the arrangements chair on the number of sleeping rooms required. Not everyone who registers for the conference will need a room at the hotel! Most, if not all, of your local participants will not reserve a hotel room. Receptions preceding meals should be in nearby or adjoining rooms.

In some cities, hotels are booked years in advance. Obtain a written guarantee stating a price and specifying the facilities that have been reserved.

How many should we plan on attending and how much space do we need?

First, check with your Regional Director and chapter leaders to determine how many people attended the past few conferences. Those numbers will allow you to make a ballpark guess about how many will be attending your conference. You will need that number for figuring how much dining and conference room space you will need, plus the number of hotel sleeping rooms you'll need to block for the conference.

The conference location staff will be able to help you set up their facilities for your needs, but make sure you take the tentative agenda with you to all meetings with the staff. They must know what to expect in the way of a program so they can prepare for meals and registration space as well as meeting rooms.

Specifically, very early on, the conference must set aside dining facilities (meal planning will come later) with an estimated number of meals to be served by the hotel; breaks when coffee, soft drinks or rolls are to be served by the hotel; how many conference rooms and about how many people in each room at certain times; registration space in the lobby or conference registration area; and reception or hospitality room.

Auction/Job Fair (if applicable)

When planning the auction setup, choose a space with enough room to set up tables for the auction items and bid sheets for the silent auction. For live auctions, consider space for standing and seating and possibly a bar area. Job fairs need areas for each recruiter to meet individually with attendees.

Hospitality Suite

Negotiate a complimentary room for use during the conference as the hospitality room. This is a great place for speakers to prepare for their session, grab some water and meet with other panelists. You don't have to provide food/drink in this room. Simple pitchers of water and glasses serves as a nice refreshment for the speakers.

Offsite events

If you are planning any events away from the conference location, work as closely with the staff of the alternate site as you do with the hotel staff.

For example, the Friday night welcome might be at a local media outlet, historical site, museum or another cultural facility. First and foremost, make sure the facility can accommodate your crowd. If you are serving dinner, especially if it is catered, work out every step from arrival through the clean-up at first contact. Make sure to clear restrictions on alcohol.

When working with an offsite venue, you may need to provide transportation (or directions and other instructions) to the offsite location.

Above all, check the rules, regulations and laws you will need to obey during the group's outing. Specifically, clarify the drinking age and any issues involving alcoholic beverages.

Program

Your conference program will be your largest attraction. You should keep in mind the goal you are trying to achieve while preparing a program that will appeal to new professionals and seasoned journalists as well as students.

Determine a theme -- or not

After selecting the meeting dates and location, you may want to select a theme for your program and carry that throughout the entire conference. Not every conference uses a theme, but it can be easier to coordinate the conference around a central idea. Publicize your theme in all conference materials, including brochures and registration forms. A pertinent theme will also help attract participants

Pick a theme early, one around which you can build programs that meet the five basic goals of a regional conference:

- professional development/hands-on training
- providing a forum for interesting topics
- conducting regional business
- honoring good journalism
- networking and interaction among journalists

Your regional conference should be tailored to your region's needs and capabilities. Anything from a Saturday-only workshop to a conference stretching from Friday through Sunday will work. There can be as many approaches as there are regions.

Mix things up

Remember: This is all supposed to be fun. Some conferences focus only on workshops. They are one-day affairs with nothing but workshops, seminars and speakers. You may choose to provide opportunities for networking and socializing. Start your regional with a social function, a party, an auction, or something entertaining. But give people a break from the talk and give them a chance to talk to each other.

Remember the student—professional mix. Don't overemphasize one over the other, even if your region largely draws one crowd. Don't force people into boredom by leaving them with nothing to do because they are above or below the sessions offered.

Involve the SPJ national officer

An SPJ national officer may attend your conference. Headquarters will notify if a national officer will attend prior to your event. Ask him or her to take a prominent role in the program. You may want to allow a question/ answer period with the national officer. This will allow your conference participants the chance to learn about SPJ as a national organization.

Other areas for involvement by the national officer: speaking on a panel; moderating a session; and taking part in the awards presentation during the Mark of Excellence Awards luncheon.

Provide instructions and information in advance

Written instructions for presiding officers and session moderators should be provided in advance. Provide necessary biographical material for speakers they are to introduce. Those presiding at meals should be given a diagram of head-table seating (if applicable) and a script.

As you prepare your program timetable be conscious of the fact that unmonitored, loose programs will run behind schedule, causing your participants to miss other presentations and your speakers to become upset. Limit maximum speaking times. Speakers should be informed of this limit and reminded of it before a panel begins. Warn them as they approach the limit and, if necessary, interrupt when they reach it. Table microphones should be provided for each panelist for the Q&A period.

Post bios and photos of all speakers on your spring conference website. This will eliminate the need to print a big program. Also, provide each speaker with a packet as they arrive (include schedules, etc.). In the packet also include tent cards with their names on it. When they get to their presentation room, they set the tent card on the table, eliminating the need for someone to run from room to room to change things.

Speakers

Selecting who you want as your speakers should have been developed early in the planning process, but getting those people to your conference is the real trick.

Coordinate your speakers with the theme. It may be interesting to have someone talking about urban journalism, but if the conference theme is environmental reporting in the Rocky Mountains or criminal justice and government corruption - such a speaker would be out of context.

Work with the idea of who would be the best speaker for your topic, then call that person and ask them if they would like to speak.

Confirm your speakers early

It's not enough anymore to tell people you are having a meeting and expect them to come. You'll need to have speakers committed far enough in advance to make people want to come.

When selecting your speakers, seek regionally or nationally prominent individuals. You need to invite and confirm these speakers long before your conference. Their calendars undoubtedly fill up fast, and you will want to publicize your speakers as early as you possibly can to attract participants.

Big name speakers can drop out at the last minute (i.e., a major news event, a better offer) and do. Always have a Plan B. If a speaker drops out of the program, see if they know of a replacement speaker.

Secure your speakers

Sure, you will be turned down by some people, but keep trying. In inviting speakers, don't take "maybe" for a response. In too many instances, "maybe" turns into a "sorry, but I can't" and that leaves a void to be filled in a desperate hurry. Even with all the new technology, telephoning is the least frustrating and quickest method of getting a reply from a prospective speaker. Be upfront with potential speakers on what your chapter will/not cover concerning their expenses.

After someone says "yes," email them a letter confirming the date, tentative time, location, their travel arrangements (if necessary for the conference to provide), and any other financial or logistical notes. A key point is to keep in touch with your speakers. Let them know immediately of any changes in the schedule or their travel arrangements.

One further point about speakers, before the conference, is to have them send you a biography and a recent photo of themselves. This is not only good for marketing, but also for introductions and identification at the conference.

Speaker fees, travel and accommodations

Some speakers who must travel to your conference may only require the chapter pay for their travel and hotel room, but always ask if there is a speaker fee. SPJ strongly discourages payment of speaking fees.

Some regions are upfront with panelists and speakers and say they have no money to pay for their hotel and transportation, while making some minor exceptions.

If you must make travel arrangements, do so early to avoid any sudden jumps in travel fares.

Q&A is recommended

Sessions should allow time for a question-answer period at the end. Fifteen minutes is generally adequate.

GETTING READY

Two weeks before the conference, call a meeting of all your workers. This is the “let’s set it all in cement” meeting and may take a couple of hours.

First item on the agenda is to finalize the program and prepare it for the printer.

After the program is ready, talk through the entire conference. Verbally walk it through as you see everything happening. This is the best way to spot unforeseen traps and make final assignments.

From the verbal run-through, develop a flow chart of sorts noting time, event, speaker and person in charge (see appendix). This will get into who will introduce whom; who is responsible for ensuring all arrangements for a given hour are made; down to who is seated at the head table.

At this meeting, go over final publicity. Plan contacts with all media outlets about speakers and programs. Invite coverage.

Check, check and re-check final costs, orders to the hotel and caterers and travel arrangements for speakers. For in-town speakers, reconfirm the time, date, place and topic. Provide a map to the location if you must, but make sure they know where and when they are to speak.

Outline what must be picked up and taken care of by various workers during the next 14 days. Insist people stick to their assignments.

Mark of Excellence Awards

The regional Mark of Excellence Awards are usually part of any spring conference – especially in bringing student journalists to the conference. Generally, a luncheon is held to recognize the finalists and winners. Headquarters will provide the spring conference planner, and Regional Director, a list of regional winners prior to the conference. Certificates will also be sent to the Regional Director from headquarters. It is the responsibility of the conference planners and the Regional Director to compare the list of winners against the list of conference registrants and to form the presentation. While certificates will be sent from HQ, the conference planners/Regional Director need to take time to rearrange the certificates, if necessary, into the

order of their presentation.

Special awards

Special awards require a lot of thought and more expense, especially if a plaque is presented. However, such awards are a very nice gesture for outstanding service within the region either to a journalist or non-journalist. If you want to give such an award, decide the area it will represent and form a special committee to take nominations and make an award decision.

Food Glorious Food

If there is one thing people notice about a conference, it's food. It really doesn't matter that your speaker is the greatest keynote since sliced bread - it is the spread before those in attendance that they really notice. Most locations are proud of the cuisine their chefs can whip up for a conference, so work with the catering staff to find their specialties that are within your price range.

Chicken is usually the cheapest item on the menu, but usually for a couple of dollars more you can get a cut of beef. Try to avoid buffet meals. They are time consuming and the people at the end of the line are rarely satisfied. Be conscious of dietary and religious restrictions of your participants when selecting your menus. Ask about special needs or dietary restrictions on your registration form. This will alert you to the number of vegetarian meals you may need and will give participants the opportunity to list any allergies they may have. Obviously, you can't cater to everyone, but you should try to accommodate, when possible.

Most of the work with the food goes back to how well you work with your caterers. Since most places insist on doing all the food preparation themselves, and will not let you bring fare in from outside, make sure you understand all their requirements of numbers to be served, how many hours ahead of time you can change the head count and how the food will be served. Read your contracts closely when it comes to food/ beverages.

As the conference draws near and attendance begins to solidify, determine a meal count and adjust your budget accordingly.

What's included in the price of a meal?

One nit-picky point that might save you some grief - check with the caterer about service charges. If you expect to spend \$25 per plate at the main banquet, the conference checkbook could have balance failure when the service charges of up to 18-24% per plate are added. Taxes will add more to the cost.

If you take your attendees outside the conference location for a meal which is catered by another service (barbeque restaurant, fish market or whatever), check the arrangements even more carefully.

Make sure the service will provide tables, plates, eating utensils, linens and other things along with the food. One final point: If a catering service is used at an outside (away from the conference site) location, check about clean-up duty. This is especially important if the outside location is a historic site or public building. If the caterer does not provide clean-up as part of the service, find people from within the host chapter who are willing to hang around after the party to pick up the litter.

Liquor and Drinks

Journalists like to drink. That is a given fact of our industry and one a conference chairperson should keep in

mind when preparing for a journalistic conference. Alcohol is expensive and can be a budget buster. It's fine to only offer cash bars at your events. You don't have to pay for alcoholic beverages.

There are reasons they have laws

Before you buy liquor and begin drafting bartenders, check the liquor laws in your state and at your location.

Something to remember about liquor: don't open your hospitality suite during the afternoon sessions. You'll lose a good portion of your audience from the program you've worked so hard to develop.

If there is one section of preparing for a conference you would like to forget about, printing and mailings are it. Finding a dependable printer is a first step in this section.

Getting the Word Out

Before you stuff those envelopes, get the printer to fold your brochures. It's worth the extra penny a piece to run them through a folder.

Contact your local tourism commission or office for free maps and other goodies. They also sometimes have discount coupons to local arts events and dining spots. It would also be good to have a list of emergency services (i.e., doctors, hospitals, dentists, pharmacies)

So, let's start at the beginning of this process.

If you plan to do mailing using the United States Postal Service, another early chore will be to decide how to do your mailings-either first class or bulk rate.

If your region is small, first class may be the best for you. It is a lot easier to buy rolls of stamps and affix the stamps to envelopes.

To bulk mail or not to bulk mail

To bulk mail, you must fill out certain forms with the U.S. Postal Service and pay an annual bulk mailing permit fee.

Bulk mail is very special and must be properly divided according to federal rules. If you don't properly divide and package the mail, you will get a telephone call asking you to "come down and resort."

Resorting 2,500 pieces of mail is a real pain, so do it right if you bulk mail. The post office will provide you with instructions, and if you don't understand or are confused, call them back. It is less hassle to place a phone call than to resort all that mail.

Who to contact

Spend time well in advance of the conference to determine how you will reach the journalists and student journalists in your area. Upon request, SPJ will provide labels and email addresses for all members in your region. Other options for promoting the event: past contest entrants, use local media guides, make direct contact with all area media outlets, state press associations, and state broadcast associations.

You should attempt to send at least two local messages to regional members -- one initial announcement with conference dates and another, more detailed program outline.

Write to professional and campus chapters, asking them to promote the conference in their newsletters.

When to email/mail

As a trial run, you might send information to all regional chapter presidents six months before the conference.

If you feed volunteers first, they usually don't complain quite as loudly when they are forced into the assembly-line manual labor of stuffing envelopes with conference sheet and hotel registration, affixing address labels (available from national - check with national at least two weeks ahead of your mailing for labels), and either peeling and sticking stamps or stamping "bulk rate," not to mention sealing the envelopes - for which we recommend a sponge or other form of sealing.

Your first promotional mailing should be sent about six months prior to your event as a "Plan to Attend" or "Save the Date" postcard or email.

Three to four months before the conference, prepare your next communication. Give a theme, tentative schedule and other interesting points to pique interest. Make sure to have hotel information and conference registration forms included in this and all other mailings. This mailing should be more specific than your first mailing.

Use email and the Web

Technology is changing daily. Put it to good use! Tweet about your conference and make a Facebook page to help promote the event. Have an e-newsletter? Put the conference information in there. Create a Web page specifically for the conference and pass the link on to headquarters. We'll post it on the Spring Conference page on www.spj.org.

How about Quill?

The national office of SPJ develops an ad listing the dates/locations of all SPJ Spring Conferences for Quill magazine. If you'd like more prominent advertising in Quill, you may want to consider purchasing ad space. Quill deadlines are available by contacting the Quill editor at 317/927-8000.

Nametags

Nametags for early registrants can be done a few days before the conference off the master registration list. There are numerous templates for formatting name badges for easy print out on the paper of your choice. Plastic holders and lanyards can be bought at any local business supply store.

Registration packets

What goes into the registration packet? The program, additional information for the attendees and anything else, such as a map to the city or a tourist guide to the area. These are usually available from the local Chamber of Commerce.

REGISTRATION (at the conference and before)

Keep a complete list of pre-registered people in a spreadsheet or database that can be broken into groups such as state, professional or student member, etc. Computerized conference registration lists makes nametags, attendee lists and final attendee counts a snap.

Registration Desks at the conference

Those who handle registration desk should know everything about procedure, registration fees, costs of single meals, etc. Have a run-through before the registration desk opens. The chair should be at or near the registration desk throughout the registration period to answer questions and troubleshoot.

Advance registration, with badges printed and appropriate meal tickets placed in alphabetized envelopes will speed registration. Registrars should record those who have not pre-registered, and the amount collected.

Badges should give title or job of wearer, as well as company and city. Different colored badges are helpful for identification of professional, undergraduate members, speakers, guests, national officers, etc.

It's Showtime

On the morning of the conference, take a deep breath. That is the last one you will get for a while. 😊

Be at the conference location with your core group 1-2 hours before registration opens to begin setting up. Call your office, and leave the locations phone number to refer calls. You will be getting them. You will also be spending the next couple of days putting out "brush fires," those wonderful, unexpected happenings (like late speakers) which always crop up at the worst possible moment.

When the programs begin, run them like a drill sergeant. If a program is set to begin at 9 a.m., start it at 9 a.m., not 9:15.

Leave 15 minutes between programs for overlap and coffee/restroom breaks, but keep it on schedule. That is possibly the best bit of advice for a truly successful conference.

Basically, run it right. Keep to your schedule and keep things running smoothly. You may not see much of the conference, but your speakers and guests won't see any baubles in the surface of the conference.

You still have to write thank you notes. Yes, handwritten notes still go a long way in the age of electronic communication and social networking. Write thank you notes to speakers, special guests and financial contributors.

You may have to wait at least a month to pay all the bills and close the checking account, if a specific one was opened for the conference.

When it's over

So you want to do a little more than just put on a program? If you want to do something really ambitious, like a Legal Defense Fund auction, several options will mean different types of work.

Odds & Ends

An auction

An auction will require another room or additional time on a room from the hotel and an avalanche of advance publicity. It will also mean the chapter will need to be working at least six months in advance trying to find goodies to be auctioned, preferably at high prices. You will also have to find some auctioneers. Local morning radio personalities are good, as are Regional Directors if they have a good sense of humor.

Pass the hat

If the conference wants to pass the hat for funds, keep a person on each box or hat as it goes around the tables. Not that anyone would steal, but to insure all funds deposited reach the final accounting. Boxes or hats can be made to fit the conference theme and good, sporting challenges from other regions can increase the contributions. Pride is a great thing.

Make a special trip – extra special

If you are planning to take the conference on a special trip, such as to a welcome dinner, after you work with caterers and site staff your most pressing need will be transportation. One year a host chapter used a British double-decker bus supplied by a local television station. Trolleys, trains, caravans of cars, almost anything will work, but it must be organized and kept to a schedule.

Appendix

Sample Program: 1

Friday

7-8:30 p.m.

Welcome reception.

Saturday

8:8:45 a.m.

Check in.

8:45 – 9: 45 a.m.

Opening Session – The host chapter president officiates a welcome by local dignitaries, the regional director and national officer.

10: 11 a.m.

Two professional development breakout sessions.

11:15 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Two professional development breakout sessions.

12:30 p.m.

Luncheon – Have a media celebrity or SPJ national officer speak. Event could be the Mark of Excellence Awards presentation.

2 – 3 p.m.

Two professional development breakout sessions.

3:15 – 4:15 p.m.

Regional leadership meeting. The regional director and national officer leads discussion about SPJ business. Chapter officers, committee chairs and others would attend.

4:30 – 5:30 p.m.

Free time touring local hot spots.

6 p.m.

Reception provided by a sponsor.

7 p.m.

Closing banquet – line up a blockbuster speaker, panel or other program. To save costs, skipping the banquet is an option but make sure to go out with a big bang.

Sample Program: 2

Friday

12 p.m. – 5 p.m.

1 – 2:15 p.m.

2:15 – 2:30 p.m.

2:30 – 3:45 p.m.

4 – 5:15 p.m.

5:15 – 8 p.m.

8 – 9 p.m.

Saturday

8 - 9 a.m.

9 - 10:15 a.m.

10:15 – 10:30 a.m.

10:30 – 11:45 a.m.

Noon – 2 p.m.

2:15 – 3:15 p.m.

3:30 – 4 p.m.

6 – 7:30 p.m.

Job and internship fair, including resume clinic. Bring your cover letter and print and broadcast clips for review by recruiters from across the region.

Two professional development breakout sessions.
Break

Two professional development breakout sessions.

Two professional development breakout sessions.

Free Time.

Welcome reception.

Continental breakfast.

Two professional development breakout sessions.

Coffee break.

Two professional development breakout sessions.

Keynote luncheon and Mark of Excellence Awards presentation.

Two professional development breakout sessions.

Ice cream social (with sponsor).

Dinner reception (with sponsor).