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PROMOTING THE EVENT

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A Beginner's Guide to Starting and Running Local Events

John Carter

The front line of the DCI in presenting Magic: the Gathering to the world at large is the event staff and organizers. Once a person has seen the ads and checked around town, it comes down to local judges and staff to make "Magic happen" for these new players. New Wave and Professional Event Services cannot be everywhere every day, so it is the responsibility of the local judges to make their area conducive to growing new players and nurturing old ones. Based on my own experiences and anecdotal references from around the country, here are several ideas for local judges for generating a player friendly environment.

First, find a public place to play. As basic as it sounds, tournament Magic can't thrive in a living room. Start with local game shops since they have the most to gain. When a store here in Memphis opened a second location, the manager and I petitioned the owner to have play spaced added to the floor plan, and now they have added customers every week with that investment. If a gaming or comic shop isn't around or unable to help, check into area community centers. In the electronic age, it is not difficult to find a YMCA, meeting hall, or even a public library that has a spare room. One T.O. in northern Mississippi successfully ran events in a library after hours. Beyond those options, check with area eateries. Often times a restaurant will have a group-sized room, and a regular group to an unused area might be warmly received. As always, remind your players to act in accordance with the surroundings.

So now you've got a place to play-great! It's time to start telling people where they can go to get that MtG fix. Among local areas, word of mouth is a great advertiser. In addition, have a sign at the event site. Also post signs at other stores, pizza places, schools, and anywhere else your potential players will gather. Get a regular schedule of events if at all possible, and make sure to publicize that schedule in advance so players know what to look forward to next week (or whenever).

Plan your events to suit upcoming formats or player requests. A good rule of thumb is to run more of a particular format that matches the current or next PTQ season. After then PTQ season is over, the scheduler might also cut back more than normal. Players will be looking for field tests for their next gonna-qualify deck, and after a long season, players tire of the same old format. If players in your area are big into limited, lean that way. If they want Standard, go there. Always be open to player requests, and try to keep the schedule somewhat flexible.

If at all possible, Outpost (the league formerly known as Arena) is highly recommended. Arena had its ups and downs in this area, and almost died out mostly through lack of active promotion. It's not enough to offer casual leagues. The league has to get announcements or a weekly leader update. Outpost helps bring the gap between the casual and tournament player and it gives efficient players something to do in

between rounds. The recent advent of foil cards for signing up and as prizes makes promoting Outpost infinitely easier.

If your schedule and play area allows it, always make room for side events. Eight person, single elimination booster drafts are often popular. However, if enough people aren't available for that, try a non-sanctioned MiniMasters or PakWarz. Even at local shops, the availability of side events gives players a chance to be a part of the decision making at their store (even if it is only in deciding what block to draft in the side).

Develop a relationship with your players and with new players. Besides being an impeccable rules source, get to know the people at your events. Take the time to learn their names. Make the event fun (two of my players share the same last name and were paired against each other in a "name" match-the loser was referred to as Jamie X for two weeks and got his last name back for his birthday). If you see a new player, make the effort to introduce yourself. Welcome them and offer applicable information. And especially if you happen to notice a parent, go over and say hello, point out how well their child is doing (or has improved, etc. so long as it's positive). Taking these steps will make a player feel more at home with your event, and taking the time with a parent helps encourage them to bring their child back.

So you've got a place, the word's been passed, the next few tournaments are planned, your Outpost packet has arrived, and you're ready to handle side events if the players are interested. What next?

The next steps in creating a player friendly environment are more complicated and require more effort than what's been covered (barring problems locating play space, of course). The next steps are going electronic, networking, importing, and paying out. Here's how they all work...

If you're reading this, you or someone you know is on the Internet. The Internet is a Magic player's best friend, and getting your event info out there isn't that hard. I wound up creating a website for the Memphis area out of sheer necessity. A website gives you a public forum to promote the event and any stores that may associate with the event. It also allows a calendar for future events and gives you a place to post information that is more specific to your area than TheDojo or MtGNews may offer. For example, when asked what next week's tournament is, if I don't remember, I can remind players to check the website. As well as that, I did some legwork on finding info for Grand Prix Memphis for this September. That info is condensed and provided to my local players because I know they'll want to go. The same goes for PTQs and Prereleases in the area.

Creating a website sounds more difficult than it is. A basic installation of Win98 (first version) includes Front Page Express. I use this for all of my website because it's pretty straightforward and I can find it wherever I find '98, but there are many free and professional HTML editors available often by download. Once you've got a few pages done, you'll need to put them somewhere. I tried GeoCities originally, but the address was a mile long, and the page loaded very slowly. I've moved to Xoom now, partly because they don't have consoles (those pop-up boxes-I hate 'em). As it is, you probably have to try to avoid getting free webspace or webspace with your e-mail these days. Take advantage of the e-ppportunity. My own handiwork can be found at members.xoom.com/Sagent. Helpful hints: don't forget the legal disclaimers, try to keep the image files from being too large (resaving at a lower resolution can often help with that), and include a reference to your website on any flyers or signs you make.

Having mastered the electronic world, the next not easy step is setting up a store / play area network in your locality. Not long ago, the two major stores in Memphis did not communicate effectively. Recently things changed. Myself and the other judges began talking very openly. In doing so, we both found that players had developed rumors and prejudices that hurt our play environment. Specific issues were resolved, and both stores publicly announced a cooperative agreement. No longer do we have player groups that stay separate. By eliminating any real cause for complaint, by making the effort to let players know that both stores want the player experience to come first, and backing it up, the local environment has grown for both stores. In an incident this past weekend, an announcement was made a one store for the other store's event (practice for the Grand Prix). One player blurted out a derogatory remark about the

other store and not going there but what caught short with a quick reminder about what remarks are appropriate in either store. That same player was at the other store the next day with several others as well with no incident.

Magic offers players and collectors an interesting opportunity: the chance to meet the people that make the game. The most common way of handling this is through artist signings. Having an artist visit is like a book signing or celebrity walk-on. One of our local stores agreed to fund a visit from Quinton Hoover recently. Having been working on getting an artist to town for a few years, I've noticed the general trend goes along the lines of the store pays for transportation, lodging, and food, and the artist gets to sell his or her prints, proofs, etc. (no additional "signing / visit fees"). An artist visit can run from \$200 to \$700, but little else can get players excited than their very own signing.

Prizes. Ick. If you're going to run a tournament, you'll have to have prizes. I've saved this bit for last because it is the hardest thing to handle with a regular group of players. However, it's never long before some player is unhappy and vocal about how much the prizes don't meet expectations (aka: blow hardcore). Your situation will wind up determining just how good the prizes can be-the best situation being a store that counts the prize at or near cost and is willing to break even on the tournament. If not, the specifics will have to be up to you. Either way, be honest with your players about what the prize structure will be. New Wave's Orlando Destiny Prerelease took a lot of flak for "bad prizes", however, the root of the problem was bad communication and players not knowing up front what to expect (or expecting something that did not occur). If at all possible for local events, give door prizes of some sort. Some stores give everyone a booster, some give a random few boosters, and I've even seen a store clean out slow moving stock (like the new-until-that-last issue of Scrye, etc.). Stellar prizes are great, but good prizes and a chance for anyone to at least get a little something promotes a diverse player pool. If your tournaments are the same eight good players and noone new, see if you can find those new players, and give them a reason to show up.

I hope that some of the things I've learned here will prove useful to you as well. With care, a judge can make Magic happen in their community. Put the players first in your events, and the players will put your event first with them.

John Carter

Level 3 Judge

T.O., Webmaster, Travel Agent, Diplomat

Comments and recommendations can be e-mailed to sagency@yahoo.com.

members.xoom.com/Sagent

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