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Organising a mobilemeet

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Introduction

Every year the Branch and Mobile Libraries Group holds a one-day mobilemeet which is a gathering of about 50 mobile libraries and usually 2-300 delegates. We have papers on current mobile library practice in the mornings followed by a guest speaker in the afternoon. During the long lunch break of 2.5 hours delegates are free to look at all the assembled vehicles.

They are invited to choose the best vehicle in the show. This award is the Delegates Choice. There are three other awards: Concours d'elegance which is for the vehicle in best condition in view of its age; the State of the Art, the vehicle showing best use of modern technology; and the Best Livery award. Trophies are presented by the guest speaker just before the end of the meet. As well as the main events we have various traders represented usually with demonstrations and also safety and driving demonstrations.

It has been my pleasure to be involved in the last 15 meets and to be main organiser of two of those. I have also been a speaker at mobilemeets in Holland, Slovenia, Sweden, the USA and Ireland.

Location, location, location

Planning usually starts about 18 months in advance and the first priority is location. Where in the country is it to be held and has the chosen town got a suitable site?

For geographic location the group tries to hold meets in all parts of the UK. However it is also conceded that to maximise the number of vehicles and number of delegates attending it is important to be reasonably central for a good proportion of the events.

How many will come?

Once the geographic location is decided a suitable site is required to ensure the event can take place. This is where the guess work comes in. How many vehicles are expected and how many delegates. It is always wisest to over estimate.

Physical requirements

Parking

First requirement is a suitable parking area. I have seen mobilemeets in large car-parks, in stately homes, on show-grounds, in market squares, in a fire station, a school, and in a park. Some mobilemeets are open to the public and others are closed events. Its no good using the market square if you don't want the public coming around the vans.

However an event open to the public is an ideal opportunity to raise the profile of the local library service. A large square car park on a hard surface is ideal for standing the vehicles safely and means the event is more compact. On the other hand mobiles parked around a lake or in the gardens of a stately home somehow seem much more attractive to look at.

If the mobiles are parked in a long line it can be quite tiring walking round, but does give better opportunities for photography. This can be a vital factor as many delegates have to do a presentation on return to work. It is also easier to judge colour schemes and make comparisons.

It is important to work out where vehicles are going to stand before they arrive and have suitably prepared marshals. It may be best to put all trailers together, or all the little vans. Marshals must be polite but firm to make sure that the parking is best for the event and not let everyone just park up so as to be first out at the close.

Physical requirements

Rooms

A reception room or area is required. If space is limited one of the larger mobiles can be used for this and can be an attractive part of a meet. A lecture room is required capable of holding all the delegates. This should be equipped with PA system and have OHP, and powerpoint capabilities. Technical support is also useful.

A refreshment room is most important and good catering is vital. Poor food or poor service can ruin an otherwise excellent event. Poor food seems to stay in the delegates mind longer than poor speeches.

If the mobilemeet is for more than one day it is vital to have good accommodation close by. As with food this must be right, otherwise the event is spoilt. It is also important to have good, safe, overnight parking for the vehicles

Speakers

Let the speakers know exactly what is expected of them. Make sure they know how long they have for presentation and how long for questions. Let them know what facilities are available. Make sure they are

met on arrival and are shown where everything is. Inform them of whereabouts of toilet facilities and any health and safety requirements, and where they can smoke if required. Keep them refreshed but don't let them drink too much! Introduce them to their fellow speakers. Give them a quiet space if required.

Always invite the local politicians, sometimes its the only time they see their own vans. If the local mobiles are of poor quality the local politicians have been known to demand action and order a new van. Give them photo opportunities but avoid embarrassing them, you need them on your side. Show them round the other vans, pointing out all the good features.

Signage

Signage is vital. First to show the way to the site itself from nearby roads. Make sure you have permission before you fix up signs. Second within the site. Signs to the toilets, the refreshments and the lecture hall are all vital

The first sign should direct people to the registration desk.

All vehicles should be given a sign to fill in and display somewhere at the front of the van

Access

The site should have easy access from the main roads. Large mobiles and trailers do not travel too well on farm tracks. It is important that the arrival of up to 50 large vans does not disrupt the town too much. It may be best to inform the local police or traffic wardens.

When checking out the site remember the weather may change and what looks a firm standing may change dramatically after rain - I know I've seen a mobile library sinking in the mud and it takes a lot of librarians to push it out!

Publicity

Make sure publicity is out in good time and that relevant periodicals have press releases. If the event is to be public, involve the local and regional press, radio and TV. A well known personality involved in the event is a good draw for the media and will help pull in the politicians.

Breakdowns

If you run enough mobilemeets eventually there will be a breakdown. Give as much support as possible to the stricken crew, advise police if the breakdown is a traffic hazard. Help the mechanic find the right van. I have seen the shock on a mechanic's face when he arrived to mend a mobile library and found a field containing 55 mobiles.

Special events

Finally make it a day to remember. I have seen mobilemeets with displays of the local food and drink. I have seen bands and choirs plus dancers. I have seen clowns and circus acts. Mobile librarians have been given trips round the lake, round the castle or stately home. They have fed the ducks and peacocks.

I have seen radio and television interviews, but the strangest of all was the man who pulled a mobile library by his ears!! He broke the world record.

So with much planning and forethought you should be able to put on a good and memorable meeting for your delegates. Its all then up to the weather which as you probably know is most unpredictable in the UK.

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He has visited 12 different countries to look at mobile library services*