

Growing Your Own Sideshow



TOXIC BBQ

A History

DEF CON's unofficial launch party is a quiet cookout that welcomes all, n00b and 1337 alike. This prelude to the cacophony and telephony grew with its host convention to a gathering of hundreds with grill temps and daytime highs to match. If each DEF CON is a hacker carnival, Toxic BBQ is its first sideshow.

We are celebrating the 15th year of grill and chill (and a hybrid return to DEF CON amidst a turbulent pandemic) by collecting tips and tricks for running a sideshow. We've also caught up with past organizers of Toxic and other DC Sideshows to get their perspective on building community and culture in the Information Age. We hope that our masticarious adventures can delight and inspire you to build (or rebuild) a culture of care and friendship at DEF CON *and* closer to home.

Special thanks to Sc0tland, TheCotMan, EvilMoFo, Deviant Ollam, the @dc_peppercon crew, and many others for making Toxic BBQ a success year after year.

Sinc,

the_bozo and DuncanYoudah0

August 2021

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The Beginning

Before it had a name, a cookout was organized on forums and IRC leading up to DEF CON in the early 2000s. Vegas locals Siviak and Scotland directed carloads of hackers to Paradise Park just off Tropicana Blvd. The shade kept summer temps as high as 117°F/47°C bearable. It was also a straight shot from the newly minted con venue, the legendary Alexis Park. The draw has been the same each year: hackers coming together to share food and catch up, a calm before the storm.

Scotland: "...my memories are really fuzzy and it's not just because we tended to have a really good time at DEFCON ... but because it was quite a long time ago now."

In 2004, the informal get-together became Toxic BBQ. Planning moved to the DC forums, and the cookout moved to Sunset Park. With publicity came exponential growth. 70 attendees became over 800 in six short years. Titanium Chef, the Beverage Cooling Contraption Contest, and HackBus all made

appearances. The BBQ was now a financial and logistical challenge for the organizers. Size also brought official scrutiny. One year was shut down early by park police, and ScOtland had to convince more than one officer that the group in black t-shirts were not a threat. They just wanted to play dodge ball.

"Someone gave me a ride and I showed up. The early days of DEF CON had a lot of goings-on like that...a rumor of 'people are all at this spot' and you'd just head to that hotel room or that local bar.

- Deviant Ollam

Whenever someone got tired, they passed it to another. ScOtland and friends handed it off to Graverobber's crew, and then to the_bozo and DuncanYoudaho. After fifteen years, organizing Toxic BBQ hasn't changed: a forum thread, audacious plans, and trust that hackers the world over would brave the heat on the promise of a burger and some camaraderie. And we're glad they keep showing up, year after year.

Community Building through Events

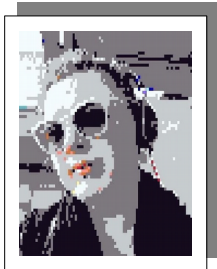
Few were as excited to talk about organizing Toxic BBQ as Scotland, Las Vegas Native and early DEF CON attendee, known on Twitter as @level2three. Other than Toxic, she has been involved in Scav Hunt, Toorcamp, and countless other hacker hijinx. She's eager to share her experiences building an event to be proud of. The following is based on notes from interviews on this very topic.

- DuncanYoudaho

Before we get down to the nitty-gritty of building your own event, let's talk about why successful ones resonate and return. As a participant, they may seem to occur spontaneously, but savvy organizers are working behind the scenes to induce and foster community, narrative, and culture of the event by including these aspects:

- Set the stage and differentiate your sideshow from the rest of the attractions.
- Adopt rituals and add in relics to unify participants in action and memory.
- Trim the fat and refine as you grow.
- Protect your attendees so they are able to both succeed and fail safely.

Through fostering and pruning as you grow, you can guide your event into something worth returning to.



Setting the Stage

High-context events like hacker, anime, and Star Trek conventions have become destinations for geek culture. Whirlwind weekends spark collaboration and inspiration in equal measure. They are havens for marginalized groups: neurodiverse with obsessions and quirkiness, cultural or racial diaspora, and online-first communities looking for face-to-face social opportunities. But these action-packed weekends can also be exhausting and impenetrable to newcomers and outsiders. Sideshows can bridge this gap by becoming on-ramps to the larger conference or islands of expertise within it.

Defining your sideshow with unique attractions will draw a subset of the con audience and help it take on a life of its own. You will need to decide if yours will showcase feats of strength, unique artists, or an opportunity to mingle on the margins. The decision of what you want your event to be, and not to be, will drive everything else you do.

At Toxic, we cut the noise, invite n00bs without requiring a secret password, and bond over burgers. This opens a space apart from the con where attendees can bridge daily life and the general convention mayhem. Scotland emphasized this in one quip, "I feel like [Toxic is] one of the few times at DEF CON where you can just relax and talk to people for a while without the *vortexing* that happens at the conference." In contrast, SkyTalks is talk track within the

convention space that asks for brutal honesty by hosting talks and panels from the most experienced hackers on the planet while also forbidding recording. Hacker Karaoke, Jeopardy, History, etc. each make social spaces and entertainment only tangentially related to technical expertise. Each one is a slice of life catering to a different subset of the general conference atmosphere. Find your niche and your event will grow.

My first Toxic BBQ was also my first DEF CON. There, I was able to figure out what DC meant to me. Have a strong opinion of who you want your sideshow to serve. As you succeed, the people looking for that different flavor will find you.

Anthropology and You

An important way humans connect after we've parted is through objects and stories. Use this as you build a culture of your own. Give participants trinkets for the scrapbook and events they will want to share. Relics and rituals connect attendees in a time and place to which they will be compelled to return.

Repeated ceremonies anchor your attendees in time. Howl as the sun sets, get a hacker name at DC101, hit the beach balls at Linecon, just don't be late. Scotland recalled a tradition that developed around lighting the fires at Toxic BBQ, "We loaded those grills with a bottle of starter fluid [each]...I am pretty sure that people in planes landing at the nearby airport could see





the columns of fire coming off those grills..." These happenings become points of reference in conversation, and it is the fact that they are done together, and not strictly their content, that gives them power. For long-running events like villages and hackerspace open houses, stations might be a better fit. This bank of tables with a yearly allotment of materials and help can be especially helpful to draw in new participants. They require more head-count, but attendees each get the same experience. They are also an easy way to put volunteers and future organizers to work. Our food line is supplied by cooks that keep everyone fed. The DC's Tamper Evident Village offers kits and tutorials for the uninitiated. Whether in time or space, these shared experiences build the culture and bring people back for more.

Giveaways are still the most powerful method of building remembrance. Throw some cash at your artist friends, and bring a memento or two to life. This swag can be anything: Puzzle cards, pins, stickers, t-shirts, or food. Whatever it is, ensure you have enough for all comers, and provide something special for volunteers to motivate more participation. These medals and ribbons spark conversations and connections



across time and urge people to return with friends in tow.

A compelling ritual and relic-driven format will build memories and reminders and become part of the draw. Your efforts will be rewarded when people reinforce the traditions and build the culture you seek.

Growing Safely

Once your sideshow is growing, it will start to take on a life of its own. By starting small and fostering organic growth, you can avoid getting in over your head. The heaviest responsibility you have as an organizer is safety. A sustainable event must be safe for its attendees.

Your sideshow will start growing by word of mouth. "Hey, there's this thing we do," is a big step, so realize that planning for growth means planning for change. Scotland did not hold back when describing how this aspect of Toxic made her feel. "I loved every second of it. The change was the Toxic BBQ's life!" The rush of a successful event is all the reward some organizers need to plan bigger and better next year. As you grow, others may pile on and bring their own activities without consulting you. This is normal and expected! Your sideshow is a "we" experience, and running add-ons gives them the confidence to run bigger events of their own. Boundaries are key. Pick and choose what you will change as activities scale out, and don't be afraid to say no. You do not have to be all things to all people, nor do you need to juggle others demands. Only commit to what you can reliably fund, produce, and clean up.

Growth is also a liability.

TheCotMan remarked, "Some time around Toxic BBQ 3, things shifted to have more takers and fewer givers.... The few remaining givers gave A LOT - likely thousands of dollars in total expenses shared over maybe 7 or 8 people." Money and time

commitments burn out organizers. To combat this, Toxic reconfigured into a mutually-built BBQ. We organized supply runs and cleaned up as a group. To the yearly volunteers, these became the rituals that tied them to the event. If we hadn't corrected, there would be no BBQ today.

An unsafe event is worse than no event at all. Proving a simple set of rules to attendees and enforcing a Code of Conduct creates a playground for safe interaction where new attendees learn the norms. This lets them try new things and make mistakes in a safe way. A rule like, "Let the cooks handle the fire; you stay hydrated" tells everyone at Toxic how to respect the most dangerous parts of the event: the fire and the desert heat. If you cannot meet safely, it will hurt everything you're trying to build.

Post-#MeToo, everyone in authority has had to reckon with how institutions foment abuse, and broadcasting your rules is signal to creeps and targets alike how you protect attendees.

"One of the highlights... for me will forever be the image of a phalanx of shopping carts moving in formation into the heart of Sam's Club..."

- zCat



Scotland shared a story about Kiwicon where someone thought it would be funny to mess with a live demo. The organizers brought the entire event to a screeching halt and called out the behavior as unacceptable. Without even knowing who the perpetrator was, organizers made it clear that the offenders were not welcome. Eject Nazis, send the aggressive or inebriated back to their rooms, and take no shit. If you shoulder that responsibility, safety will become the mainstays of your culture.



Whether you're running a cookout, contest, or runway show, the space you create should allow for both growth and failure among friends. And you will have plenty of each. As Adam Savage said at DC17, "I don't trust people that haven't failed." So plan for growth, but also for trouble. Be prepared for the worst to protect the best.

Culturation

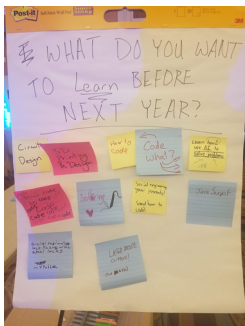
In the end, organizing takes its toll on you, the organizer, and the physical logistics of events are the easy part. Take time to think about what you've accomplished, together, as the event happens. Enable clear boundaries and lines of delegation to prevent yourself from becoming overloaded. Respect yourself and attendees by being realistic about social obligation.

Villages, parties, and sideshows are for making connections outside the maelstrom of the main event, and this includes you, the organizer. ScOTland recalls, "...sitting alone for a few minutes seeing everyone happy and just having a good time with their friends," as one of the most rewarding things from the BBQ. "Honestly right now in writing this there is nothing I would like more than to be at that BBQ." We've talked about things that drive culture and growth for attendees, but nothing is more invigorating for you as an organizer than taking in the community as it happens.

The rewards are as unpredictable as the costs. Your event is not about growing your personal fortune or social capital. The first thing Graverobber said to us when we took over Toxic BBQ was, "This is not a money-making venture." As it becomes a part of your identity, don't let the event consume your wallet or relationships. "People depended on me...but we kept it light enough that it wasn't a burden," ScOtlund shared when asked about the effort that went into the early BBQs. Don't be afraid to

early BBQs. Don't be afraid to delegate and do your one thing well. "If you keep it real, don't take it too seriously, it will never run away from you." The most powerful thing you can do for your own peace of mind is, "No, maybe next year."

As we restart face-to-face events, make sure you give others this slack as they discover what they're comfortable with. Avoid



exploiting FOMO and bifurcation of your post-pandemic audience by pushing for a similar scale or pressuring old hands to return before they're ready. Respect those who will not go, and seek actively to allow them to be included at a distance. Treat your event as if it were starting from scratch every year, and you will be rewarded with a new and vibrant version of your sideshow that is matched to what you can do today while still feeling like home.

In Conclusion

Your event is a combination of community, narrative, and culture. Equipped with a clear format and the tools to protect yourself and your attendees, you can create a space in time that is adored and whose return is sought after. As traditions develop, you can help turn a small gathering into a draw for hundreds, a thing-apart that "we" built together. In our sometimes insular communities, this cross-over is the fuel for healthy growth, creativity, and life-long connection.



The Odyssey of HackBus

Regional caravans are part of conference traditions, and the trip can be an adventure in itself. PacBell drove a city bus from Oregon in the early days of DEF CON. EvilMoFo and Fpenguin followed suit in 2007.

The HackBus was a 1956 GM PD 4104 bus delivered to Public Service Coordinated Transport in New Jersey. A quick vacuum and some old couches allowed it to make the trip from San Fran to DC15, but it didn't return home until October. A laundry list of repairs, including a new engine, kept it on the road year after year.

Those who rode it to DEF CON said it was one of the most entertaining, if sweaty, ways to get there. Bay Area hackers worked on it together to add amenities like 16G internet (4 carriers x 4G each!), pirate radio stations, and sometimes-functional AC. In addition to the road trip to DC, the HackBus ferried legions to Toxic BBQ, and it also rescued The Minibosses when *their* van broke down on the way to the EFF party.

Due to Fpenguin's interests outside DEF CON and EvilMoFo's role at Scav Hunt, they kept the bus home after DC23. Sadly, the HackBus was destroyed in the 2020 North Complex Fire. Apart from pictures and memories, the front license plate and metal DEF CON Jack are the only mementos that survive.

Deviant Ollam's Rules

I've started, and handed off, a lot of events and whatnot at DEF CON over the years. I've distilled my advice to aspiring organizers to a few key points:



1. Prepare to show up early.
2. Plan to stay late.
3. Have at least two people who will do the same.
4. You will lose money; you're investing in community.
5. Have at least one person to capture images, share stories, post online, etc. That person shouldn't be you.
6. Publicize how people participate in what you're doing. That's how it grows.
7. During the event, document and take notes on how it's going. Use these notes to correct and iterate for next year.

- dev

Planning a Sideshow

The path from “there’s this thing we do...” to conference-legend can be rocky. We’ve collected tips from our notes and interviews into a firehose of recommendations for you and your team. We hope these will nudge you from `wishing` to `holding` your “thing-apart” for everyone’s enjoyment.

- the_bozo and DuncanYoudaho

Location

◆ Where?

Make yourself easy to find. Stick close to your parent venue. If off-site, provide relative directions from the venue. Also give out an absolute location/address for taxis, an information desk, or maps app.

◆ Control the Space

Reserve the site for your group’s exclusive use. Whether a con booth, suite, or off-site, ensure you can enforce crowd size limits, CoC, closure, and clean-up.

◆ Understand the Rules

Be an expert on the rules of your venue so your guests don’t have to be. Is glass allowed? How loud can we be? When do we need to be gone? Where does the trash go?

◆ Prepare for a Crowd

Plan for a larger group than you expect. If possible, choose a venue into which you can grow over time. If venue costs are a burden, find other groups to add and grow with.

“How many people do I think would be there and was the space the right setup so we could have a blast?”

- Scøtland

Organizers and Organization

◆ **Get a Partner**

You will not be able to plan an event of any significant size alone. Find a trusted partner or two and share your plans, expenses, and passion for.

◆ **Know the Locals**

If you are from out of town, find someone who is local and add them to your inner circle. They can store equipment, obtain permits much easier, have transportation for supply runs, and know who to call for emergencies.

◆ **Centralize Planning**

Have a clearinghouse for info, deadlines, tasks, costs, and contacts: Trello, Asana, Basecamp. Record how and when to reserve the venue, produce swag, and contact volunteers. Take notes during the event (you won't remember later), and do a postmortem after everyone is home again.



Equipment and Supplies

◆ **Memento Mori**

Anything you borrow or bring to the venue can be lost, taken, or broken. You can't watch everyone, and you can't predict everything. Especially not possibly inebriated strangers at a once-a-year gathering. Leave Meemaw's tea service for a home soirée.

◆ Rent First

Renting equipment is cheaper, short-term. Take storage into account when you buy equipment for your party. Don't buy into your own hype. Until you can guarantee you will reuse it year after year, borrow before you buy. Ask the venue, ask locals, rent as needed.

"Did you know you can just *rent* velvet rope, brass standards, and fancy walnut pillars? Perfect for displaying your recreation of *The Internet* from The I.T. Crowd in a fitting manner."

- DY

◆ Plan for Setup and Tear-down

Prepare to get there early and leave late. Even if you are soliciting help from attendees, it is your responsibility to make sure everything is cleaned up and rental items are returned on time. You are the only one that can ensure you get your deposit back.

◆ Share the Costs

One organizer should not be expected to shoulder all the costs of the event. If you take donations, a little transparency goes a long way. Remember that labor is a cost. Taking off work to get a permit is a cost. Be prepared to say no or "maybe next year". Be realistic with yourself and others about what you can deliver, and delegate whenever possible.

Advertising

◆ Start by Word of Mouth

When your shindig grows by word of mouth alone, you might be ready to advertise. Decide who your audience is and target them: Post in forums or pass out fliers. If you want everyone to come, get in the conference program.

◆ Create a Brand

Reusable glyphs and themes are good for fliers, venue signage, and swag. Keep these in a place all organizers have access to. If you're not talented, throw money at artists in your subculture or on Fiverr. They can whip up an eye-popping array of choices that will tie your event message and community together through the power of art.



◆ Swag

Giving stuff away is the most powerful weapon in your organizer arsenal to stoke cohesiveness and growth. Everyone who darkens your door should walk away with a token. Volunteers should get something different. Pins look great on lanyards and can be mass-produced for under a quarter. Stickers can be even cheaper. Shirts are expensive, but can be walking billboards that last multiple years. Plan with production lead-times in mind. You don't want to be stuck with 100x "Fyre Festival" shirts because you forgot to order them in time. Beware of logistics if you decide to sell swag: cash, transport, storage, and inventory all eat into money for staging the event itself.



Trouble

◆ **Placate the Law**

This is not the time to “fight the power”. Obtain permits. Pay fees. Head off any hard lessons before your guests have to learn them. Offer security deposits, donations, and clean-up services to nervous venues wondering why 500 nerds in black want to meet on a Thursday in 110° heat.

All of these extra rules were unpopular among many of the organizers and attendees, but they did what was needed to make sure the Toxic BBQ could happen again.

- TheCotMan

◆ **Closed Events are Manageable**

Fairs that charge admission are usually permitted differently from family activities or clubs. Emphasizing to venue administration that your sideshow is not open to the public can help them understand the scope and danger when renting to you.

◆ **Everybody Gets Home Safe**

Sometimes, the trouble comes from within. Make a short list of event rules, and adopt your parent event's CoC. Make a plan for how to deal with harassment and hostiles. Have a contact at the main event and escalate issues that could spill over to become their problem. If attendees don't feel safe, they will stop coming.

◆ **Emergencies**

Know the fastest way to reach emergency services in the community where the event is held. Stock and replenish first-aid kits in your supplies. Have appropriate safety measures for your featured activities (fire suppression, stranded guests, security contacts, etc.)

All Good Things

◆ **Prepare for Cancellation**

Family emergencies, sudden venue unavailability, and power outages can all affect your event. Have a plan on how to relocate or shut down. Think about how you would notify people of such for off-site events. Account and plan for inclement weather through shelter or alternate sites.

◆ **Call a Dud Early**

You only have so much time during a conference. Keeping people waiting at an event that is falling flat is a disservice to them and you. That being said, if those that did show up are having fun, lean into it. The first DEF CON was built from the ashes of a going-away party. We've turned a board game meet-up into a crypto-puzzle confab. Be creative with what you have.

◆ **Don't be Discouraged**

Learning how to organize takes time and practice. Be patient with yourself as you learn through mistakes. Sure, no bathrooms mean everyone dances whether they like it or not, but it will soon be a funny story. Begin planning for next year the moment your guests arrive. Keep an eye out for what needs to work better next year.

◆ **Let Go**

Culture is built together and does not depend on one person. Prove it. When emergencies arise, let others step in and finish the job. The best outcome is that your event doesn't need you at the helm.

"I got to see this whole new side of DEF CON that I hadn't seen before because I was connected with the BBQ."

-Scotland

Spotlight: Peppercon

As your event grows, Sideshows to your Sideshow may pile on spontaneously. My favorite at Toxic BBQ is the crew that brings home-grown hot pepper products to share with everyone. I'll let them tell it in their own words:



We usually prefer heat measured in scovilles, not Fahrenheit, but what better place to find people interested in crazy hot peppers than a cookout? We usually start the rounds like this:

"Hey, you like spicy food?" "Wanna try a hot pepper?" "How about some spicy whiskey?" "Wanna put a kick on that burger?" But it's the siren call to convention-goers that gets the best response: "We've got swag..."

Soon, the brave are sweating, turning red, and bringing their friends to share in the misery and ecstasy. A blonde from Wisconsin chomps a ghost pepper like it was nothing while her tough guy friends tear up and search for liquid relief.

Sharing food and drink is one of the simplest, and strongest, expressions of friendship, and we've made a lot of friends at this BBQ. When someone grows an idea and keeps it alive, it becomes greater than the sum of its parts. A space and time that exists on its own. We couldn't be more glad to be a part of this. Thank you to all the people that show up and make Toxic BBQ happen. Can't wait to see you all again.

With much love - Peppercon

What Brings You Here?



What Brings You Back?

For 15 years, hackers have been cooking in the desert sun on the first day of DEF CON. This zine is a celebration of and how-to guide for “Sideshows” just like it. Learn what it takes to start and grow an event from the organizers of Toxic BBQ and others in the hacker community.

Toxic BBQ is
16:00- 22:00 DEF CON Thursday
Sunset Park
Pavilion F
(36.0636, -115.1178)