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# How Phoenix Comicon ignited Arizona's geeky convention market

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Greg Fennell knows it's not child's play to put on a con.

As the owner of Monkey Paw Entertainment, Fennell produces five conventions aimed at fans of Japanese animation. They typically aren't for the uninitiated, and those on the outside might think they're run by fanboys and what outsiders would label as geeks.

Fennell knows different. He said those so-called geeky conventions able to survive and prosper require savvy business management skills.

"There's a perception that these are run by a bunch of kids, but I love to organize conventions, and venues have come to recognize that," Fennell said.

The conferences that have sprung up in reaction to comic book movies hitting the big screen have grown not only in attendance but in the attention they draw. And in the Valley there is big money for those who embrace putting on the shows, as well as those businesses that can capitalize on thousands of people showing up.

Right now, there is bigger event than Phoenix Comicon. The event held annually in late spring at the Phoenix Convention Center drew a record 106,096 attendees at its early June outing this year.

While the event doesn't have a direct figure for economic impact, Phoenix Comicon conducted a



DAVID RUBINSTEIN

Cosplayers — the term used to describe those fans who dress as their favorite characters at comic conventions — appear by the hundreds at Phoenix Comicon.

survey and found that each con-goer spends on average \$152 in the exhibitor hall and attends three days of the four-day event.

### **Starting small**

But Phoenix Comicon, which has grown to be a cornerstone of geek culture in Phoenix, wasn't always the tourist powerhouse it is today.

In 2002, during its first year, owner Matt Solberg said Phoenix Comicon drew 432 attendees.

"Back then comic conventions were really about comics," Solberg said.

Solberg said before the pop culture and glamour of celebrities, comic conventions centered around trading and buying comic books, and that the conventions had their place as an important community hub.

The success of Phoenix Comicon came with the ingredients for a perfect storm around 2010: the rise of comic book movies, social media and selfie culture, according to Solberg.

"After that we saw attendance skyrocket," he said.

Solberg formed his own company, Square Egg Entertainment, to expand his event company to Phoenix Fan Fest in the fall and recently bought a Halloween convention called Keen Halloween as the demand for such events grows.

### **Expanding empires**

Solberg isn't the only one looking to gather geeks in the area. Two other conventions in Arizona, focused on Japanese animation — known as anime — called Con-Nichiwa and Saboten Con were created jointly by Solberg and Fennell.

Fennell bought the two conventions from Solberg so the Phoenix Comicon owner could focus solely on growing the big event. Later, Fennell expanded to five events.

Phoenix's calendar for geeky events has grown through the years, from a small comic convention to a growing list of anime, gaming and furry fandom shows.

The convention circuit is a tight-knit group though, where it seems every owner and showrunner knows each other. In fact, Fennell said many attendees to his cons are not exclusive to one event. Some conventions grew from demand at other conventions.

### **Spending big**

Fennell, who owns five conventions, four of which are in Arizona, said starting a convention business is not for the faint of heart.

The owner cited the starting price of running a competing show in the Valley at \$25,000 to \$35,000. Most of the money goes toward booking a venue and setting rates with hotels, Fennell said.

Solberg agreed a small convention could survive on that estimate, but to run a polished show the number can rise to \$55,000. The cost of bringing in guests, ranging from popular anime voice actors to stars of TV shows and movies, can increase expenses dramatically.

“There’s so much competition now,” Solberg said.

As for demographics, Solberg said Phoenix Comicon and its fall event, Phoenix Fan Fest, draw families and young people to its doors.

Fennell said his demographic for anime conventions skews younger, with more teens and young adults filling the halls.

He admitted for one of his conventions focused on the furry fandom, where attendees dress up as anthropomorphic animals, persuading venues can be more challenging.

“But once they see we bring in money, they come to rely on us coming back,” Fennell said.

### **Big attraction**

The conventions can mean big things to an area’s businesses. In Mesa they are part of an effort to drive traffic to the city’s downtown area, said Michelle Streeter, vice president of communications for Visit Mesa.

“In regards to the geeky component, it certainly fits well with our eclectic downtown,” Streeter said.

Vendors say the geeky conventions offer a different type of clientele. For Kathy Martin Gilbert, owner of Redheaded Ruby and who only sells her handmade art at conventions, it’s a big change.

“I absolutely love selling at conventions,” she said. “The patrons are there to enjoy what’s basically a big party and they’re friendly and supportive of each other’s fandoms.”

It’s not always a boon for vendors, said Steven Irwin, co-owner of the Nerdy Wino who makes and sells art and jewelry.

“Every show is a gamble. We’ve been to steampunk shoes where none of our steampunk jewelry sold,” he said. “At (Keen Halloween), our partners at Masquerade Mojo did a little less than predicted with masquerade masks. Shows in Arizona at least are hard to call how you’ll do.”

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