Contesting 101

How To Run a Contest

By W9WI

I'm told the first thing you learn when you join the Army is to *never volunteer for anything*. I apparently never learned that lesson. In the early 1990s, I enthusiastically agreed to help relaunch the Tennessee QSO Party after a lengthy absence. It's been a lot of work, and a lot of fun. Kirk, K4RO, asked me to write a few words about managing a contest; here goes...

Every small contest manager I spoke with agrees: a contest must be a team effort. A successful competition depends on a variety of skills, including (but not necessarily limited to) administration; publicity; Internet; and information technology. It's rare to find one individual with the necessary abilities – but common to find them among the numerous members of a radio club. Don't attempt to go it alone.

What does your group hope to accomplish? Some contests were launched to help amateurs earn awards offered by the sponsoring organization - for example, the ARRL International DX Competition was started to help hams earn their Worked All Continents award. Some contests are intended to encourage activity on a particular band or mode. And some groups simply hope to get members on the air and have a good time!

This would be a good time to ask a fundamental question: are you <u>sure</u> you want to run a contest? There are 33 contests listed for December 2010 on WA7BNM's Contest Calendar. I've never heard of 25 of them. That doesn't necessarily mean they're bad contests! - but it does mean they have rather limited activity. Will your contest offer something unique?

If you're going to have a contest, you have to have a date. We've seen a few conflicts in the contesting community lately, groups launching new contests on weekends already occupied by longer-established events. A date conflict with a major contest is going to bury your event in the QRM. A conflict with a smaller event may be a bigger problem than you expect.

Be sure to check your chosen weekend against the contest calendars:
- WA7BNM Contest Calendar, **<u>www.hornucopia.com/contestcal/</u>**
- ~~SM3CER Contest Service,~~ **~~www.sk3bg.se/contest/~~ (site still exists but hasn't updated since 2017)**
- Contest Corral, in *QST* or on **www.arrl.org/contest-calendar**
- contesting, in *CQ Magazine.*

Don't forget to check for conflicts that have nothing to do with radio. Tennessee Contest Group members occasionally ask why our QSO Party is held on Sunday only. Such questions usually result in a prompt post by someone else suggesting that if the contest is between the Tennessee QSO Party and the University of Tennessee football game, the football game will win!

A contest without rules is chaos... The goals your group has established for your

contest will serve as a starting framework for your rules. Remember that you're working on a team effort here. Circulate your proposed rules through your organization, and take their input seriously.

Keep contest software in mind. Most operators do not update their software regularly; even if your contest is supported by the current versions of major packages, it probably won't be supported by the versions used by many entrants. Unusual scoring methods are likely to cause confusion. I don't think any package ever supported the "triple mults" offered by the Tennessee QSO Party for several years.

Keep your exchange simple. Hams who aren't participating in your contest will stumble across those who are. If they can figure out what's going on, they're likely to hand your entrants a few points. RS(T) and location are by far the best idea.

Consider plagarism. Several QSO Parties have emulated the very successful Wisconsin event. (as you might guess from my callsign, our Tennessee QSO Party is one of them!)

We stole one particularly useful rule from the Wisconsin QSO Party: the short, one-day schedule. Our contest runs for nine hours on Sunday afternoon and evening. This schedule offers several important advantages:

- Fewer conflicts. A Sunday-only contest can share its weekend with the North American QSO Parties and Sprints. It can also share its weekend with a college football game!
- More operators able to make a full-time effort. Many of us can't afford to give up an entire weekend for a contest. It's a lot easier to commit to seven to nine hours.
- Fewer miles for mobiles. A mobile wishing to be active for the entire event is going to be awfully tired of driving by the time a 24-hour contest is over... Seven to nine hours is much easier to handle.

If nobody knows your contest is happening, you're not going to have much activity. Publicity is critical. Be sure the contest calendars know about your event. (see the list above) A few other means of publicizing your event:

- Your website.
- Area hamfests. Most hamfests have an information table. Leaving a stack of flyers here may snag a few casual participants.
- Local clubs. You can search for ARRL affiliated clubs on www.arrl.org/find-a-club.
- E-mail. Don't be a spammer, but you should mention your event (once!) a few days in advance on the CQ-Contest mailing list. Some sponsors e-mail notices of this years' event to previous years' participants.

Speaking of your website.. Don't think of it only as a means of publicity. Greg, K4KO, has built **www.tnqp.org** into an information center for the Tennessee QSO Party. We have the traditional schedule, rules, and past years' results. We also have a map of planned county activations, and a signup list for those planning on activating one or more counties. We also have a list of official county abbreviations. (your logchecker will appreciate this!)

Once your contest is over, it's time for your resident computer geek to take over. There

doesn't appear to be any standard for logchecking in smaller contests. W3KM's *Cabrillo Log Evaluator* (**mysite.verizon.net/dmascaro1/cabrillo.htm**) (URL changed to https://www.qsl.net/w3km/cabrillo.htm) is probably the closest thing to an off-the-shelf logchecking package. Most sponsors seem to use either a custom spreadsheet, or homemade packages involving SQL databases and Perl, C, or Java code.

Obviously, some amount of computer talent is going to be critical here! Depending on the size of your contest, you may need a computer <u>team</u> here. Once you've written the software, computers can do the logchecking fairly easily. However... several QSO Party sponsors have told me the most difficult logchecking task is getting all logs into a consistent format. In the 2010 Tennessee event, we received 183 Cabrillo files. We also received ADIF files, spreadsheets, assorted non-Cabrillo text files, and one XML file. We also received eighteen paper logs.

A few years ago, presenting the results was a matter of writing up an attractive word-processor document, printing a few copies, and mailing them. Most smaller contests asked entrants to enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) for results. In 2010, more than 90% of Tennessee QSO Party logs were received via e-mail. You can attach a lot of things to an e-mail, but you can't attach a SASE! We have the resources to continue mailing results. Many small contests don't. A growing trend is to post results only to the club's webpage. You may wish to e-mail a link to entrants.

Some of your entrants will win something. <u>What</u> will they win? Certificates are easy and inexpensive to prepare with standard word-processing software. For some smaller contests, resources are still an issue. A few sponsors e-mail winners a link, where they can download an Adobe PDF file of their certificate.

The Tennessee QSO Party allows members to sponsor plaques. A plaque is offered <u>only</u> if it's sponsored. Jeff, K4BP, produces our plaques at a cost of around $30 each. Julius, N2WN emphasizes the importance of considering shipping when designing plaques; make sure they will fit in a standard Priority Mail box. A number of contests offer other prizes. Often, edible regional specialties are awarded for special achievement. Again, as Julius suggests, consider shipping!

The contest is over. You've checked all the logs, mailed all the certificates and prizes, and answered all the PSE QSL cards. Now, you can forget about it until next year, right?

Well, really, no. While the contest is still fresh in your group's minds, it's time to think about next year. Did something go wrong? Is there something you'd like to do differently? For the Tennessee Contest Group, the log submission deadline is also the starting date for soliciting suggestions for the next years' event. Suggestions are boiled down to a number of specific proposals, which receive an up-or-down vote. A new set of rules are prepared, which are mailed out with this years' results.

OK, <u>now</u> it's over. You can sit back and rest. Fire up the rig, find someone else's contest, make a few dozen contacts, and make them do the work!

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