

eGuide



Special Events



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INTRODUCTION

Special events are essential functions for nonprofit organizations, strategic opportunities to advance donor relations, build community and amplify revenue generation. These events should be routine components of a nonprofit's comprehensive fundraising strategy, annual budget and schedule, particularly if they are annual events or relate to the local community calendar.

Although the particulars of such events are as varied as the broad range of nonprofits they benefit, there are established practices to streamline the planning process and ensure success. Even if the primary objective of the event is not fundraising, such as donor recognition, presentations or lectures, they will ultimately impact the bottom-line of a nonprofit's overall fundraising and budget. Effective planning and preparation restrains the budget for these events to a minimum while maximizing the revenue generation, directly or indirectly.

The specific scope, theme and primary objectives of any event will be determined by your nonprofit's Mission, traditions, donor base and available budget. Nevertheless, there are key ingredients in the planning process which will promote the success of your special event or fundraiser.

Special events, particularly fundraisers, have tremendous potential to promote your Mission while expanding both your donor base and revenue. There is always the caveat to not only align your event with your nonprofit's Mission and strategy but also to plan it appropriately to meet your organization's current priorities.

Even an annual event that has been part of your nonprofit since its inception may require some tweaking to accommodate the current circumstances of your organization as well as external factors, such as the economy or local issues. The success of your event is dependent upon planning that reflects appropriate allocation of resources – time, talent and budget – relative to your current Board, staff and volunteers.

Key Strategies

Defining Your Event Special events are as unique as the nonprofits that host them, ranging from children’s activities to cultural events. Use your organization’s strategic plan and fundraising program to design an event that will promote current priorities and needs of your nonprofit.

Scope of Event To ensure your success in achieving your primary and ancillary goals, your special event should be challenging without detracting from your nonprofit’s operations, programs and Mission. Create an event that will advance your goals yet still be manageable based on your nonprofit’s available staff, volunteers, talent, time and budget.

Fundraising Component Even a donor appreciation event has a fundraising element associated with it, such as corporate sponsors or gift-in-kind donations specific to the event. Be creative but base your fundraising opportunities on the event and its primary and ancillary objectives.

Marketing & Promotion Effective events are well promoted in advance to your target audience. Use as many communication channels as possible based on your nonprofit's staff and budget as well as your donors' preferred communication channels.

Event Planning Timeline Plan and schedule event preparation working backward from the date of the event. The time required to put your event plan in motion will be determined by the scope of your event and resources available.

Budget Carefully develop an event budget appropriate for the amount of funds available in your annual budget and to make the event as cost-effective and profitable as possible.

Follow-Up Once your event has been completed, celebrate success with your team then immediately initiate strategic follow-up to leverage the buzz and momentum your event created to optimize fundraising results.

Donor Engagement

Regardless of the size, theme or goals of your special event, there's one pervasive common denominator overarching all nonprofit events: donor engagement. Consistent, effective donor engagement will always be the key ingredient to solid, successful nonprofits. It will also distinguish a good event from a great one.

Donor engagement should be a foremost consideration throughout the event planning process. And it extends far beyond verbal communications. Donor engagement should be a consideration when selecting a venue, time and theme as well as when designing and implementing the event program. How thoughtfully your planning and event incorporates donor engagement will determine the level of meaning and relevance the event will have for current and prospective donors.

Your current donor data should guide your event planning relative to your event objectives. Know who your donors are, individually and collectively, in terms of age, location, interests, preferred communication channels and giving history. Donor segmentation enables you to know your donor base and plan accordingly.

Your donors preferred communication channels dictate the primary marketing and promotion for your event. Their age or geographic concentration may make the venue choice obvious. And their giving history and wealth scores will enable you to establish appropriate ticket prices.

Donor segmentation will also help to develop efficacious messaging about your nonprofit and the event, then present it through the most effective communication channels, pre- and post-event. Relying on the guidance donor segments provide also ensures a maximum Return on Investment for your event.

During your event, compelling donor engagement should be job #1 from presentations to conversations. Empower your Board, staff and volunteers with quick training or tutorials on how to radiate a donor-centric organization with a vital Mission to all donors and potential donors during the actual event.

Optimize the Event

There's a broad range of nonprofit special events, spanning dinners, performances, panel discussions, fairs, festivals, sales, lectures, benefit concerts, car washes, bake sales, facility tours, walkathons, home and garden tours. More important than the function itself is that it relates to your organization's Mission and rallies your donor base without detracting from your operations, program(s) or annual budget.

Choose a right-sized event manageable for your nonprofit's existing resources and unique community. Once you've decided on the type of event, be creative to expand the opportunities for promoting your nonprofit, underscoring the importance of your cause and generating revenue. Corporate sponsorships and parallel virtual or online fundraising can exponentially increase your results.

Often overlooked and severely underutilized throughout the nonprofit sector are gift-in-kind donations, which can minimize the expenses related to your event. When seeking corporate sponsors, event underwriters or gift-in-kind donors for venue, catering, awards, etc., always initiate the dialogue by telling the prospect what their support of your nonprofit's event will do for them, such as the number of attendees they will be able to attract or the media exposure they'll receive. Although you want to present a memorable event, keep expenses to a minimum to maximize the Return on Investment, including staff, budget, time and talent.

Fundraising opportunities should be integrated into the entire planning process, pre-event, during the event and post-event. Use of virtual events and online crowdfunding can amplify both your donor base and fundraising results.

Once the main event has been defined, be innovative to provide all attendees unique experiences and opportunities. Use event follow-up to continue engaging donors and potential donors. Honor all donor and prospect conversations your Board Members, staff and volunteers had during the event as a reason to stay connected with your nonprofit's growing community.

Promoting the Event

Promoting your nonprofit's special event should complement your organization's overall donor-centric communications strategy and fundraising plan while being specifically designed for your target audience. The broad strokes of marketing your event should highlight your nonprofit's vital Mission while demonstrating its value and social impact. The ideal marketing, whether through traditional media, social media or one-on-one engagement, should pursue the objective of your event while complementing your organization's overall branding.

Having a marketing and promotional plan in place, which includes assigning individuals or teams with specific tasks and definitive due dates, will ensure a seamless pre-event, event and post-event process. The more you and your team can do in advance, the better. Preparing invitations and marketing materials prior to their release will provide more time for direct engagement with your target audience prior to the event to enhance its overall success. Disappointing attendance or outcomes of events is usually related to sending too few announcements and invitations out too late.

Be sure your corporate sponsors understand and pre-approve the marketing plan as it relates to use of their logo and branding content in advance. Invite them to become brand ambassadors for your event, too.

The sooner you can begin promoting the event the greater success you will have. Your nonprofit's website, newsletter and social media pages should prime your target audience with early mentions of the event even if all the details have not yet been finalized. Always make it sound like *the* event of the season or for your local community.

Your actual invitations or evites should be sent out with sufficient time for your target audience to make arrangements to attend. Use photos of previous events or ones which capture the essence of your nonprofit's Mission to deliver a more inspiring reason to attend or support your event.

You can double or triple your overall event results by providing nonattendance options for those who are dedicated to your nonprofit but unable to attend because of schedule conflicts. Hosting parallel online or virtual events can have the same magnifying effect on the fundraising and outreach results, particularly if your donorbase is not geographically concentrated in a specific location.

Make sure all marketing information and invitations cover the bases of your event, answering all of the who, what, when, where and why questions. Always include a phone number and email for individual inquiries and be certain to monitor your voice mail, email and social media sites to respond in a timely manner to those expressing interest in or having questions about your special event.

Creative, exciting marketing, promotion and publicity done in concert will help you and your organization achieve the primary and ancillary goals of your event. Marketing includes everything you and your team do to announce your event. Your event marketing doesn't have to squander the budget either. Simply adding a line about it or a link to information about the event to your email signature can attract a wider audience. Including mention of the event in your voice mail message informs vendors, donors and program participants alike about the upcoming event.

Promotional activities include all event advertising your nonprofit intentionally arranges, whether donated or paid for. Promotional materials can include ads, posters, flyers and printed invitations.

Publicity for your event is generated through media reporting. In addition to sending out pre-event press releases and photos, you will want to invite your local press to the event and treat them as considerately as you do your target audience. Get in touch with your favorite press contacts as soon as possible so they can save the date and begin promoting your event in their columns and/or blog posts.

Once you've had your special event, continue the marketing, promotion and publicity for as long as possible. By extending a wider net post-event, you can pique interest of your secondary target constituencies as well highlight your nonprofit's great work, wonderful event sponsors and/or donors. Post-event marketing should always invite others to join your nonprofit's community with a "it's not too late to be part of . . ." message included.