

# MAKING *Special Events* WORK FOR YOU



BY STEPHANIE ROTH

I used to strongly discourage groups I worked with from doing special events. They take so much time, I would say, and don't raise that much money. Why don't we use the time we would have spent on events and just go ask some people directly for money?

But no matter how strong a case I made for not doing events, groups would continue to do them. In fact, events continue to be one of the most popular fundraising strategies in communities all over the country. From golf tournaments and dinner dances to barbeque cook-offs and poetry slams, people understand special events — and they like to attend them. Over the years, I've changed my views on events, and while I still believe that they take a lot of time and often don't raise much money, particularly for small groups, there are many important reasons (including fundraising ones) to keep them as part of your fundraising plan.

In fact, special events *can* raise money, but not in a short amount of time, and because they take a lot of people-power, it's important to make sure that there are other things you want to accomplish from your events. Just holding an event and charging an entry fee will not raise significant amounts of money. Often, if you counted the time that paid staff put into organizing an event, you would find that you have actually lost money.

Like many of you, I've been involved in both successful events and ones that were not well thought through. Here are some things I've learned that may help you get the most out of your events.

**1. You can use special events to create other fundraising opportunities, because they lend themselves to many ancillary methods of raising money. *These include the following:***

***In-kind contributions:*** Getting donations of food, printing, the venue, entertainment, and so forth will cut costs and allow you to increase your net income from the event. In addition, a local business or corporation is more likely to contribute a product or service than they are to give money to your organization, especially without a prior relationship of some kind. Getting an in-kind contribution for an event can be a way to get a foot in the door and start building a relationship with that company.

***Sponsorships:*** Obtaining sponsorships is a common way for groups to increase the net income of their events significantly. Both individuals and businesses can be solicited for sponsorships — that is, a financial contribution

above and beyond the price of admission. For example, an event may cost \$25 to attend, but sponsors may pay from \$100 to \$1,000. In exchange they receive varying kinds of "benefits," depending on the level of sponsorship. Benefits can include extra tickets to the event, the sponsors' name on the invitation, an ad in the program book, and even a company logo displayed

prominently at the event. You will find that a certain segment of your donor base that doesn't respond to other kinds of direct solicitations will give to your organization every year as an event sponsor.

***Silent Auctions:*** A silent auction is a way to increase contributions from the people attending your event. You

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can charge a ticket price that is affordable to a broad range of people and have a silent auction at the event that gives people the opportunity to give more. Products and services are solicited prior to the event and are auctioned off during the course of the evening. A sign-up list is attached to each item, usually with a minimum bid to start, and people bid (silently) by signing their name and the amount they're willing to pay for the item. Each subsequent entry, of course, has to be greater than the one before.

**Ad Books:** Ad books are booklets distributed to guests attending your event. They are comprised primarily of paid advertisements, but should also include information about your organization, a list of supporters, and the program for the event itself. Even some very small organizations have found ad books to be an effective way to add a few thousand dollars to their event income. The prospects for ad sales include local businesses, vendors your organization uses, self-employed members and donors who want to advertise their services, as well as those who just want to include a greeting or message as a way of showing their support.

## **2. Successful events bring people closer to your organization, building relationships that will strengthen other aspects of the organization.**

We talk a lot in fundraising about building relationships. You've probably noticed that people are more likely to give to your organization if they feel connected in some personal way. This includes, of course, believing in your issue/cause/project, but belief alone isn't enough to enable you to count on ongoing support or develop the potential for very large gifts.

Sometimes events are the only time an organization interacts face-to-face with its donors and members. A special event provides the opportunity for you to show off your organization to your constituencies — donors, members, allies, and clients. It is an opportunity for staff and board members to interact in an informal and celebratory way with the people who both benefit from your work and make it possible.

Here's an example. A small community organization with a very active membership holds an annual dinner every year. What makes it an especially fun event is that the members — who are mostly low-income families from the African-American and Latino neighborhood in which the organization works — prepare all the food. There is always a wonderful assortment of delicious home-cooked food, including fried chicken, greens, rice and beans, fried

plantains, spaghetti, and a great selection of pies and cakes. The evening is always behind schedule and the entertainment is usually some kind of program organized by the members consisting of songs, skits, and testimonials about the work of the group. Nobody minds that the sound system doesn't work very well or that the show is more like an amateur hour than a professional performance. The event is very successful because it builds community, involves members in fundraising, and celebrates the work of the organization. Donors who wouldn't otherwise have much contact with members are inspired by the spirit of the event and the chance to see the organization's work up close.

This event is not a big money-maker, though the group usually nets about \$3,000, mostly from the proceeds from their ad book. The event is unlikely to ever draw corporate sponsorships or bring in new donors. There is too much of an "everyone knows each other" feeling about it and too little to attract someone who didn't already have a connection to someone in the group or the work the group is doing. But the event does a lot to build and strengthen already existing relationships and has resulted in larger gifts from some of the group's loyal donors.

## **3. Events are often a good strategy for bringing in new donors.**

If getting new donors is an important goal for your event, think about what would motivate someone to attend who has little or no relationship to your group. In that case, the program and entertainment become more important as a draw, or you might consider creating a host committee of people whose involvement would persuade their friends and colleagues to attend.

Here's how one organization used an event to bring in new members. Because a lot of this organization's work focused on research and policy issues, it wasn't highly visible to people in the community. As a result, they had very few individual donors. They wanted to produce an event that would reach people they didn't already know, so they decided to engage an entertainer who would attract new people and at which the group would honor some of the organizations that had benefited from their research. They found a well-known local singer to perform and chose three organizations to honor for their social justice work. The groups that were honored were able to attract some of their supporters to the event and the host committee was key in filling up the tables with people who had not

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previously contributed to the organization. The event was a success in getting the group more widely known and increasing its number of donors.

Being clear about your goals with regard to bringing in new folks or strengthening your relationships with current supporters will help determine the kind of event you choose, the way you structure the program, and how you engage your audience.

**4. Events can generate publicity, which increases awareness of your organization in the community.**

Because they happen on a certain day, or involve well-known people, or are interesting in the way they are organized, events are one of only a few fundraising strategies that can generate publicity for your organization. A media plan should be part of any large special event. In a small town or rural community, any size of event can be a media event. Also, keep in mind that “publicity” is not just about media coverage, but can simply mean that your organization is being talked about by a cross-section of people that you want to reach. Fliers on telephone poles, announcements in community newspapers, or in bulletins from religious institutions or service clubs or in organizational newsletters are often the most effective form of publicity for grassroots community organizations.

**5. Special events can be a great way for volunteers, including board members, to get their feet wet with fundraising.**

It’s not as intimidating to sell tickets to an event as it is to ask someone directly for money, because the seller feels they have something tangible to offer — a chance to socialize, an interesting performer, a tasty meal. In addition, for board members and others, events may be the only fundraising strategy they’re willing to be involved in, which alone may be reason enough to include special events in your fundraising program. However, once someone has a good experience raising money in the context of an event, they may be more willing to take on a new challenge and ask directly for cash.

Here’s one example of how that happened. Ella, a board member, invited five friends to attend her organization’s annual dinner. Two of them came and had a great time, so much so that each gave an additional gift in response to the pitch that was made part-way through the program. During the next several months, they occasionally asked Ella how things were going in the organization.

At a board meeting several months later, the group was getting ready to launch its individual donor campaign and the staff was encouraging board members to participate in a few major donor solicitations. Ella remembered how impressed her friends had been with the work of this organization, so she volunteered to ask them directly for

a major gift. In doing so, Ella expanded her fundraising comfort zone.

**6. Special events provide opportunities for volunteer leadership.**

Even for relatively small events, the amount of time and attention to detail required to produce a successful event is enormous. For this

reason, staff should not be the key people organizing an event. When they do, they often end up letting other important work (including other fundraising work) fall by the wayside, especially during the few weeks before the event. One way to limit the amount of staff time spent on events is to hire an event coordinator (even then, staff will need to play some key roles), or to develop a committed group of volunteers with the time and skills to do much of the organizing.

Aside from the practical reasons to use a volunteer committee, organizing events is a good way to involve members (including board members), allies, and donors in the work of your organization. If your organization is one where there aren’t many opportunities for volunteers to be active, this is a great way to build relationships with your supporters and friends.

**NO QUICK FIX!**

Though special events are probably the most popular and most frequently used fundraising strategy, they’re not the quickest or easiest way to raise money. Because of the lead time and labor required, you cannot raise large amounts of money in a short amount of time with a special event. If you need money fast, consider strategies such as personal face-to-face solicitation for major gifts, writing and phoning your most loyal donors to ask them for an additional gift, and implementing a monthly pledge program. **GF**

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