
The Correct Use of Special Events

By KIM KLEIN

While you are reading this article, all over this country, and around the world, volunteers are meeting to discuss how they are going to raise money for their group. Inevitably one bright spark is going to be saying, “Let’s have garage sale. I heard that the Humane Society made \$15,000 on their sale.” Another bright spark will say, “No, too much work, and everyone is doing them. Why don’t we have a Spice Girls/Springsteen/Beastie Boys/Aretha Franklin concert?” And one person who has been through both the garage sale and the concert will think to herself, “Why don’t we just have an appendectomy without anesthesia?”

Events are the most common fundraising strategy. In fact, if you ask people what grassroots fundraising is, most people will name an event as an example — bake sale, dance, walk-a-thon. In this article, we will review what events are good for and what they are not so good for.

WHY DO AN EVENT?

When choosing a fundraising strategy of any kind, whether it is direct mail, a phone-a-thon, planned giving, starting a small business, or other strategy, you need to first ask yourself a series of questions: What is it we want from this strategy besides money? Do we need money from people or places that haven’t given us money before? Do we need to be better known, and if so, better known by whom? Do we need money quickly, or can we wait a while for payoff? How much money do we have to spend on this strategy? How many people are available to help with this strategy? How does this strategy fit into our overall plan? The answers to these questions will help you determine whether an event, and what kind, is right for you to do now.

The following are the reasons to do an event:

- **You need to increase your overall visibility.** Your organization is not well enough known among people who would be inclined to support you, and these people can be reached through an event. That is, they live near each other and your organization, and they tend to turn out at other organizations’ events.
- **You need publicity.** To reach the people who would be

inclined to support you, you need to be in the media. You choose an event that will reach the media you want to be in: your neighborhood newspaper, your alternative radio station, your local news channel.

- **You want to raise money from people or places that would not give you money otherwise,** or you want to raise money from people who are new to your organization (such as those who have been attracted by the media attention you have received).
- **You want to thank people who have done a lot for your organization by giving a party.**
- **You want to announce the beginning of or celebrate the conclusion of a campaign of some kind.**
- **You want to honor one or more people who are very important in terms of the issue you work on.** By honoring them, you will not only raise money, you will also associate your organization with them. In this way you will become known to at least some of the people they are known to.
- **You have a number of volunteers who want to help with fundraising, who like each other, and you want them to have a sense of accomplishment.** You hope that if they do well with an event, they may be willing to move into more difficult areas of fundraising, such as major gift solicitation.
- **You have a number of inexperienced volunteers and you want to train them in some aspects of fundraising.** An event provides a good training opportunity.
- **You don’t immediately need the income an event will bring in, and you have some money you can spend to put on an event.**

Any one of the above may be a reason to have an event, but no reason by itself is enough. At least three of the above reasons need to be applicable for an event to be successful. For example, if you simply need more donors and need to be known among a different group of people, you could try a direct mail campaign or a door-to-door canvass instead of an event. If you need media coverage, there are other ways to get it than an event, which often

won't generate more than a mention. Even needing to celebrate a victory is not reason enough to do an event. You would also need volunteers and some money to spend to make the event fun.

Answering the questions above about whether an event is the way to get what you want will also help determine, or at least narrow, the choice of what kind of event you will mount. Do you want lots of people to attend? Will there be an entrance fee? Will corporations be invited to sponsor the event? What activities are the volunteers you have most comfortable doing?

PRELIMINARY TASKS

Once you choose what kind of an event to have, you have three tasks to complete immediately. The completion of these tasks will often allow you to see ways to improve your event, or to rethink whether an event is the best way to accomplish a subset of your fundraising goals. The three tasks are to create a master task list, create a budget, and create a timeline.

1. Create a Master Task List. Make a chart with three columns: What, When, Who. Under "What," write down all the tasks — from the tiniest to the largest — that must be accomplished for this event to be successful. Under "When," write down by what date each task must be done. Later, you will assign these tasks to individuals, filling in the "Who" column. Leave it blank for now.

2. Create a budget. From your Master Task List, identify everything that will cost money and everything that will raise money. From this new list create a budget with total expenses and a projection of total income. Compare totals and see if you feel comfortable with the likely outcome.

Some events break even, or even lose money, but are still considered successful because they accomplish other goals. For example, an event to launch a capital campaign might consist of inviting prospective donors to the site of the new building, then giving them a brief and interesting look at the blueprints and the artist's rendering, and describing the kind of excellent work that will be able to happen in the new space. No money would be raised at the event, but prospects would be visited individually later.

Some events are very expensive to put on, and a budget may show income of \$50,000 and expenses of \$40,000. If raising \$10,000 was the only goal, this would not be a good way to go about it, but if the event attracts corporate sponsors, media attention, and builds relationships with new donors, a percentage of whom can be counted on to give over and over, then spending that kind of money would be considered worthwhile.

3. Create a timeline. If after steps 1 and 2, you are satisfied that the event you are considering is the right one, proceed with this step. In this step, you plan backwards from the date and time of the event to the present to make sure you have not left out any tasks, that you have calculated all costs, and that you have allowed enough time for everything to get done smoothly.

To begin this task, imagine very specifically the place where the event is being held and the starting time. You are standing there. Look around. Is everything in place? Where will people park? Are you sure the facility is wheelchair accessible — check the bathrooms and the hallways as well as the main room. Are people going to bring children? If so, will you have child care? Does the venue look nice? Should you put some flowers on the table?

In order for everything to be in place for the start of the event, what needs to be done the day before? Two days before? The week before? The month before? And so on. Work backwards in your mind.

Do not hurry through this task because this is the check-and-balance task. Tiny details surface during this task that could have a big impact on the event.

For example, a group invited a famous person to speak. She asked for a podium and microphone. As the committee imagined her walking up to the podium, one member suddenly realized that this woman was quite short, and most podiums are built for men. In her imagination, she literally saw the speaker disappear behind the podium. Quickly, the group added "Find a riser or find a shorter podium" to their task list.

NOW THE WORK BEGINS

When these three steps are complete, you are ready to assign tasks from the task list and to actually begin the work of putting on the event. By spending time examining your fundraising needs to determine that an event is the best strategy for meeting them, and then by carefully working on the tasks outlined here, you are assured, pending some unforeseeable disaster, that your event will be successful: It will reach the people you want to reach with the message you want them to hear, the volunteers will have a good time planning and implementing the event, and the event will raise the money you need it to raise. Shortchanging these steps to save time will result in spending time kicking yourself later and regretting the ways things came out.

You will spend the time, one way or the other. You might as well do it right the first time.