

Avoiding the Highly Contagious “Special Events” Bug

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The event committee meetings have been long, frequent and intense. Subcommittees have offered detailed descriptions of their challenges. Time has been reallocated from other initiatives, and resources have been redirected. Board members have weighed in with their directives.

Take a peek inside one of those meetings and what do you hear? Discussions about strategic vision? Opportunities to be seized? No. You hear endless discussion about napkin colors, hole sponsorships and balloon vendors.

Welcome to the nonprofit event – one of the most abused, misused and addictive forms of fundraising—one of the main reasons fundraisers pull out their hair and ask, “When will this craziness stop?”

How about now?

We’re not suggesting that events have no place in a fundraising program. On the other hand, we are saying that, unless you’re thinking strategically about why and for whom you’re hosting these events, unless you’re setting real goals for what you want to achieve at and after the event, and unless you’re keeping your event in perspective as one component of the overall fundraising plan, then your event is probably – like the balloons discussed *ad nauseam* – full of hot air.

A matter of perspective

The problem is not with events in general. The problem is that organizations relying heavily on event income typically measure success by only two metrics: attendance numbers and income. By focusing only on those two factors, they overlook more important measures, as the following examples demonstrate.

The Golf Outing.

The weather has cooperated and the foursomes are full. Almost every hole has a sponsor and every golfer will get a shiny new sleeve of golf balls. Everything seems perfect ... and then your executive director steps to the first tee box and finds four 20-something junior professionals from the local bank yakking on their cell phones. He overhears them bragging that they are playing golf on the bank’s dime for some charity, they’re not even sure which one.

Is this what you spent all that time planning for? So your CEO could shake hands with a hundred golfers who have little interest in supporting your organization? So he could eat lunch with the only people your real targets could find who had the time to spend a day out of the office?

The Gala Dinner. All the tables are full and the speaker is booked. The menu meets everyone's needs and the cash bar is ready for action. The attendees begin to form a line at the registration table and you soon recognize a trend.

Sure, the biggest company in town purchased two tables, but the people filling the seats seem to be guests of the company, not those individuals in the company who are interested in your organization or able to influence future support. Your suspicions are confirmed that they are only attending for the free meal when you realize that none of them are bidding in your live and silent auctions.

You can easily see the challenges in these two examples. The attendees are not the ideal audience to educate or even ask for a gift – and yet you just spent nearly \$30 a plate to wine and dine them.

Your staff certainly sees the low return on investments of cash, time and energy. But how do you get your board to understand that long-term sustainability for your organization will likely never come from events? The best approach is to go to them with solid criteria for deciding whether an event is right – or whether other tools would do a better job for your organization.

Assess your event

Here are some steps to include in your assessment of that single-solution event – whether it's the golf tournament you've held for years or the gala dinner your new board chair wants to hold next year.

Review how you got here. Detail how you came to the conclusion that an event is the best way to raise money. Are all of your assumptions still accurate and correct?

Don't just plan – strategize. Decide the purpose of the event at the outset. Is it to raise money or to cultivate relationships? Raising money implies there will be an “ask.” If so, make sure your prospects are capable of giving and passionate about your mission. If you are focusing on cultivating donors, then smaller, more intimate gatherings might be a better option than a 400-person dinner gala.

The event's over; now what? What's the follow-up strategy? Will attendees get a personal call from a board member seeking a gift? Will thank you notes be sent? Events can be so time-consuming that we often consider the event to be the finish line and

overlook the follow-up! Organizations that use events effectively consider the conclusion of the event to be the beginning of a new relationship.

Don't lie to yourself. Sure, we all want successful and profitable events, but we often shy away from considering the real costs of the event when we evaluate profit. Did you account for paid staff time? Doing so may have a negative impact on net revenue. How have you considered the cost on your volunteers? Events can often lead to volunteer burnout which is a real and detrimental cost and can have significant negative consequence on future fundraising.

Ok, so now that you're thoroughly disappointed with your events, what consolation can we offer?

Try a different approach

Keep doing events, but as part of a diverse fundraising program. Events shouldn't be automatically shunned, but they should be incorporated into an overall strategic development program and not viewed as singular activities to raise money. Just as certain programs will interest some donors but not others, events-based fundraising efforts will connect with some while leaving others unmoved. Diversify to find ways to reach all of your donors and prospects.

Host smarter events. Consider the notion of having more small events rather than one colossal activity. These could be small receptions in a board member's home for donors and major gift prospects, or coffee with the president for planned gift candidates. These are generally less costly, less time-consuming and more focused on getting you closer to the "right people."

Take the cure

A wise board member once shared a simple, yet lasting interpretation of event fundraising: He said that a reliance on events is sort of like a cold. It's easy to "catch," but difficult to get rid of. He's right. Think about how easy it is for a board to decide that an event will cure all their ills, how easy it is to become dependent on events, and how hard it is to wean the organization off of them.

Unfortunately, there's one other, perhaps even more problematic aspect to this "disease:" Once you've trained your donors that events are your preferred method of fundraising, it's that much more difficult to then open the door to major gifts and planned giving. And where's the fun in that?

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