

Taming the BEAST

Four Keys to Creating that Special Event

A large-scale event can boost support for your organization without overworking your staff.

BY MIMI MAJOR

Signature special events are powerful tools for generating support. However, they can sometimes weaken an organization internally, bleeding energy from overworked employees and leaving them to chase neglected goals and projects.

If mention of your special event at staff meetings inspires more groans than cheers, it's time to look at how your organization can "tame the beast"—harness the power of your special event while minimizing its assault on your staff and resources.

Hands On Atlanta provides a good example. It has grown its signature special event, Hands On Atlanta Day, from 200 volunteers in 1990 to over 15,000 volunteers in 2001. Hands On Atlanta Day is the nation's largest day of service, involving thousands of volunteers in hundreds of service projects around metro Atlanta. Volunteers participate in activities such as reading with children, cleaning streams, painting murals, visiting seniors, and planting butterfly gardens. Like many signature events, Hands On Atlanta Day provides invaluable visibility for the organization and its work.



Projects such as constructing garden benches provide opportunities for teamwork.

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As the event has grown in participation and scope, Hands On Atlanta has developed some unique strategies to balance quality and quantity without depleting staff and volunteers of the strength and motivation to continue working toward the organization’s mission throughout the year. Any nonprofit organization can use these methods to guarantee the success of a large-scale special event.

1

Harness Volunteers’ Passions.

Recruit volunteers for more than labeling envelopes, answering phones, and other “administrivia.” Use their leadership talents and skills. Identify potential volunteer leaders, and involve them in planning and organizing your event.

Many volunteer leaders find working on a community event a refreshing change from their day jobs, and they bring fresh perspectives and passion to their roles. For Hands On Atlanta Day, volunteer leaders are organized into task-specific committees such as logistics, recruitment, project development, and food and entertainment. Each volunteer committee is empowered to use members’ talents, networks, and creativity to meet the goals outlined for them. To be sure no tasks are duplicated or forgotten, each volunteer committee has a staff liaison, and all committees report to the event volunteer chair and staff coordinator.

Volunteer leaders also help expand the scope of your event. While most Hands On Atlanta staff members focus on developing service projects, many volunteer leaders turn their attention to organizing the volunteer appreciation party at the conclusion of Hands On Atlanta Day. This party lets participants relax, network, and enjoy the fruits of their labor while savoring great music and food. It’s a valuable tool for recognizing volunteers and corporate supporters while providing the perfect finale to the event. The appreciation party would not be possible were it not for the leadership of volunteers.

2

Use a Team-based Volunteer Model.

Instead of recruiting 10,000 volunteers—an overwhelming if not impossible task for a small staff—Hands On Atlanta recruits 500 team captains. The captains then

recruit their friends, families, and coworkers to form teams of 5 to 500 volunteers. After recruiting volunteers, captains serve as liaisons between their teams and Hands On Atlanta staff, selecting a project and making sure their team members are registered and well-informed.

Team-based recruitment lets Hands On Atlanta meet participation goals with a fraction of the effort. Staff can thus spend more time improving the quality of the event, ensuring that volunteers have a good experience. As with any event, if volunteers have a good experience one year, they’re likely to return the next year with friends in tow.

Volunteering as a team also fosters a sense of camaraderie and esprit de corps among participants, encouraging volunteers to follow through with their commitment and enhancing their enjoyment of the project. Teams inspire healthy competition that spurs creativity and hard work.

Team-based registration can work effectively for most types of special events. Tournaments, competitions, and fill-in-the-blank-a-thons lend themselves easily to the team format. Even for invitation-only events such as banquets and auctions, team captains can increase response rates by adding credibility and prestige to your organization’s invitation and by fostering friendly competition.

When seeking team captains, contact the heads of such community groups as neighborhood associations, faith communities, alumni organizations, professional clubs, families, and corporations. The idea is to decide on the audiences you want to involve, look for groups that exist naturally within that audience, identify the leaders of those groups, and inspire and empower them to lead their groups in your direction.

3

Use Technology to Share Information.

Recruiting volunteer leaders and team captains is just the first step toward planning your event. If these volunteers don’t have access to appropriate tools and information, they may be more a hindrance than a help.

Hands On Atlanta has streamlined registration and information-sharing with its Web site, HandsOnAtlanta.com. The Web site takes volunteers



Hands On Atlanta Day volunteer sorts cans at Atlanta Union Mission.

through the registration process and empowers team captains to manage their teams online. They can send e-mail invitations to potential volunteers, who then confirm their participation with a click of the mouse. Team captains can view project information online and then select a project that works for their team. The Web site also helps team captains send information, such as driving directions and event schedules, to their team members via e-mail.

Because the Web site is a centralized source of event, project, and volunteer information that can be updated instantly by multiple users, it reduces staff and volunteer time previously spent handling forms and phone calls. It also decreases the risk of duplicate entries and lost files and provides an up-to-date account of registration progress.

In addition, the Web site captures volunteer contact information, allowing Hands On Atlanta to communicate with participants regarding event updates and post-event evaluations. After the event, the organization has all the information needed to invite people to take part in opportunities throughout the year.

The more information available on your Web site, the less time your staff and volunteers have to spend on the phone. Marketing and promotional material can direct people to your Web site where they can get information at any time without worrying about making an immediate commitment. Putting information such as important deadlines, maps, directions, event schedules, and FAQs online can improve the consistency of your message and increase the number of people who receive it.

Draw people to your Web site by making it useful, interactive, and exciting. Periodically update the amount

of donations collected and the number still needed to reach the goal. Invite Web site visitors to e-mail a postcard about the event to their friends. Have an event registration form available for downloading to save participants a trip. As people rely more heavily on the Internet for their information needs, it's important for nonprofit organizations to take full advantage of the technology available.

4

Involve Corporate Teams.

The corporate community is frequently asked for donations of money, food, or advertising space and courted with offers of logo placements on T-shirts and invitations to VIP luncheons. Yet corporations are seldom asked to donate their time. You can take great

strides toward your recruitment and fundraising goals by involving corporate teams in your event.

Corporate human resources departments view participation in a quality event as an opportunity for team building and boosting employee morale. Marketing departments understand that greater involvement in an event increases the corporation's visibility in the community, both during the event and through the media coverage surrounding the event. Employees enjoy the opportunity to get to know one another outside the office and to involve their families. Fueled by industry competition and team spirit, corporate groups are often the largest Hands On Atlanta Day teams.

Because corporations feel more connected to your organization's mission after serving in the trenches, they're more likely to support your events and year-round activities with fervor. Inevitably, companies that provide employee teams for Hands On Atlanta Day want to return as high-level sponsors the following year.

Find Your Potential.

Planning a signature special event is always a wild ride. With these proven strategies, you can harness the energy and full potential of your event, each year generating renewed enthusiasm and support both internally and externally for your organization and its mission. ■

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