

Improve Your Special Events

Success may require a change in strategy.

By William Smialek

The fundraiser's rule of thumb is that a viable fundraising event should net at least 50% of gross receipts. In today's climate, it's becoming increasingly difficult to meet this goal.

Some nonprofits believe the solution is to raise ticket prices, find more sponsors, and hold more events. Many post-event evaluations conclude not with robust plans for improvement but a pledge to follow the same basic plan with greater zeal.

In an unpredictable economy, however, this strategy is unlikely to increase revenues. To understand why, consider the three pillars that support the success of an event – and the problems associated with each one:

1. Corporate sponsors and vendors. Sponsorships are becoming harder to obtain. Today's businesses are unlikely to sponsor an event unless they receive a comparable return on investment, including targeted recognition of their support. In some cases, securing more sponsorships can actually escalate event costs, with no net increase in charitable gifts.

2. Volunteers. Keeping the participation and enthusiasm of these workers requires staff training and planning. Loss of this workforce – they are elderly or have relocated – can weaken the event. It can also scramble the social networking that generated past attendance.

3. Constituents who attend the event. These people can be quite fickle. Their attendance may wane unless the activity is kept novel.

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Why not have more events?

In some cases, holding more events may be an option. Adding a different activity lets you reach a different group. Adding an event at a different location may be worthwhile if you serve a broad geographic area.

But multiple events targeted at the same constituent group have a limited impact. Most donors commit to a level of giving that will only be divided among events. In the case of a small nonprofit, adding events stretches staff capacity. The return on investment of time and effort won't be justified.

Should we change direction?

A conceptual shift can make all the difference. First, consider your event less as a fundraiser and more as a relationship builder. Second, focus on the reason for each person's charitable giving.

Boards seldom consider why people support a special event. They assume it's because of a belief in the nonprofit's mission. But that's only one of many motivations.

As fundraisers, we should consider psychological research into giving. One major reason people join a cause is as an identity symbol.¹ They hope to be grouped socially with other supporters, often specific individuals in the community.

Pursuit of status is an undercurrent in all successful charity events. Status seekers support causes to develop new social and business relationships. They then engage in “competitive altruism” or “strategic generosity” with these new contacts.

Focusing on the psychology of philanthropy will be more productive than increasing the number of events. Here are some helpful approaches:

- **When recognizing corporate sponsors,** include the names of key executives. In any community, certain philanthropists are publicly linked to corporate resources. Announcing their names will fulfill their need for recognition. It will also satisfy your supporters' desire to be identified with people of status.
- **Do research on those who have attended your events in the past.** Discuss what you and others in your organization know about them. Discover what other causes they support. Consider their possible motivations for attending your events. You may need to dig deeply to uncover this information. For instance, connections related to social status can be hidden behind church relations or the ethnic identity of spouses. Such knowledge will help you choose ways to boost supporters' involvement.


¹ Alison Ledgerwood & Ido Liviatan, “The Price of a Shared Vision: Group Identity Goals and the Social Creation of Value,” *Social Cognition*, 28, No. 3, pp. 401-421; Cameron Anderson & Gavin J. Kildoff, “The Pursuit of Status in Social Groups,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18, No. 5, pp. 295-298.



“Consider psychological research into giving.”

- **Encourage your board and staff members to attend other local events.** Observe the social networking that strengthens people’s support.
- **Give people tangible symbols of the status they’re seeking.** These needn’t be expensive, as this excerpt from Jonathan Franzen’s novel attests: “I used to work at the Conservancy, and when we’d have our annual gala, the rich people were happy to buy a table for twenty thousand dollars, but only if they got their gift bag at the end of the night. The gift bags were full of worthless garbage donated by someone else. But if they didn’t get their gift bags, they wouldn’t donate twenty thousand again the next year.”²
- **Be sure your event facilitates networking and social-circle expansion.** Give people chances to mingle. Provide them with name tags that display their names, titles, and affiliations clearly. Include ice-breaking activities to make it easier for people to get to know each other and exchange information.

No matter what the economy, people look forward to gathering socially at events that serve a worthy cause. A special event can be a vital part of your strategic plan. To make it successful, all you need to do is change your frame of reference.

Incorporating people’s need for social status into planning your event isn’t a change in direction but a way to penetrate more deeply into an existing donor base. Doing so will help you turn once-a-year event-goers into long-term major donors and build relationships that will last a lifetime. 

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CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Break a Record

Consider having your volunteers set a world record on Guinness World Record Day, which comes around every November (for details, go to www.guinnessworldrecords.com). You can try to set a mass-participation record or have volunteers simultaneously try for the same record.

For instance, more than 300,000 volunteers set the world record for most people simultaneously reading aloud. Over 1,500 volunteers set the record for most people wearing Groucho Marx glasses at the same time and place.

You can try for a record no one has even thought of before (Guinness World Records approves thousands of brand-new records each year.) Raise funds by having volunteers ask their friends and family to sponsor them in the event.

Be Pet Smart

Team up with an animal-assistance group, hold a pet-themed event, and split the proceeds. For example, Frankfort, Kentucky’s Critterpalooza features a pet parade, silent auction, and dog obedience demonstrations. Bark in the Park in Belleville, Illinois, entertains crowds with a dog-owner look-alike contest, while a fundraiser in Greenville, South Carolina, includes displays of dog agility (don’t call them stupid pet tricks) and brings in over \$30,000 through donations and entry fees.

Put on a Stylish Show

At California’s Mira Loma High, students spend the year creating and sewing purses, which they model at the annual Lulu Fashion Show. In Newport, Massachusetts, high school students saunter down the runway in new and vintage clothes that businesses have donated. In both cases, the items are auctioned off at the end of the evening. You can create similar fashion shows with clothes or fashion accessories created by local artists. For more creative fundraising ideas, see *FUNdrising* (Corwin Press, www.corwinpress.com).

BUILD FOR THE FUTURE

Uncover motives, cement relationships, and sculpt successful events with these *Nonprofit World* articles (NonprofitWorld.org/members):

Relationship Marketing: Guaranteeing the Future Vol. 14, No. 5

How a Special Event Can Raise Your Visibility (Vol. 13, No. 6)

Helping Donors Choose Your Organization: Using Image Theory to Change People’s Minds (Vol. 28, No. 2)

Taming the Beast: Four Keys to that Special Event (Vol. 20, No. 4)

Deeper Donor Relationships = Increased Contributions (Vol. 26, No. 4)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits (NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).

² Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom: A Novel*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, us.macmillan.com/fsg.aspx, p. 215.