

How to Turn a Memory into Support

People love ceremony. Raise money by encouraging them to celebrate with you.

By Karen Eber Davis

Are you unforgettable? More important, is your nonprofit on the lips of thousands at least once per year? You can help people remember you by creating a ritual that celebrates your work.

This column explores remarkable ideas that nonprofits are using to increase their income and reach. This month we study Persons Day, a day familiar to Canadians but little known south of the border.

The Strategy

In Canada, every October 18, thousands of people gather in 13 cities to celebrate Persons Day. The festivities celebrate five women who won a legal victory in 1918. From that date forward, women were considered persons under the law.

Several groups sponsor Persons Day events, including the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund and the Canadian Voters Congress. One Persons Day event draws over a thousand people each year.

Unpacking the Strategy

What fundamentals create this approach? How can you adapt it to your needs? Use the following as a checklist as you consider different adaptations:

- **The strategy re-celebrates a victory** otherwise easily forgotten.
- **It helps people remember, appreciate, and notice progress** on a continuing journey.
- **It brings people together** around your work.
- **The strategy can positively impact** your organization's income, resources, and status.

What This Strategy Is Not

The Persons Day strategy isn't just another event. Instead, it's a ritual that helps people put things in perspective. It helps them remember the past, recognize the present, and glimpse the future. It invites contemplation.

How Can You Use This Strategy?

1. Identify an event, turning point, or person that uniquely represents your nonprofit.

Check if a day or event already exists for your cause that you can capitalize upon. Search for "commemorative days" on the Internet.

For example, a variety of organizations around the globe hold ceremonies connected to the Worldwide Candle Lighting at 7:00 p.m. on the second Sunday in December. Some organizations hold both public and private remembrances associated with the Lighting.

Another example is Philanthropy Day. Every year on November 15, hundreds of nonprofits hold ceremonies, galas, luncheons, seminars, and similar commemorative and educational events to pay tribute to the contributions made by volunteers, donors, and others in the philanthropic community. One chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals recently made \$40,000 on its Philanthropy Day luncheon.

2. Create a ritual. Help people reminisce and reflect.

As a child, did you have assemblies for Arbor Day, Flag Day, or Thanksgiving? My classmates and I shivered around a newly planted tree on Arbor Day. Teachers and students recited the pledge of allegiance, listened to tree poems, and sang a song. As I quivered, I marveled at the older trees around me ready to leaf out in the Connecticut spring. I wondered how the newly planted sapling might join its huge older counterparts in time.

In the bustle of our lives, rituals give people a place to stand, stop, ponder, and see anew. They lend wonder and perspective. Offer your community a chance to remember your work and your cause by shaping a ritual around it.

3. Start small. This year, for instance, announce a new holiday and tweet it. Next year, celebrate with a coffee at your worksite. Invite a dozen people you want to meet. Year three, hold a small ceremony at an art gallery featuring an exhibit related to your cause.

Here's another example of how to start small: A group recently celebrated the birthday of their organization's founder with an opening ceremony outside their facility. The doors were locked for 15 minutes for a remembering ceremony. That's the kind of simple beginning that can become an important tradition.

4. Consider the setting for your celebrations. Where might they be held? At your site? Virtually? Privately? In a public venue? All of the above?

5. Plan how the celebration will serve your organization. Don't make the event stand alone. Give it some context.

In resource-strapped nonprofits, as many actions as possible need to do double or even triple duty. Ask yourself:

- **How will you connect the remembrance** to your other strategies?
- **What will people learn?** Remember?
- **How can you involve** the media?

6. Decide how to use the event to support your income needs. During most worship services, it's a common ritual to pass a plate for donations. Can you do something similar? Will you earn mission income from ticket sales? Ask for donations at the event? Follow up with a mail ask to participants?

This isn't being mercenary. It's being smart. Maximize your results. Plan for money and more.

7. Build. Instead of starting new each year, make your celebration an annual occasion. Create momentum. Build on past success so your marketing efforts serve to remind, not introduce. Consider new low-labor-intensity elements. Switch out tired or unsuccessful efforts and fine-tune your celebrations. 

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