

EAGLECLIFF ASSOCIATES

FUNDRAISING EVENTS: 12 BUILDING BLOCKS FOR GUARANTEED SUCCESS

Introduction

Fundraising events are a common experience of everyday life most everywhere in America. Bake sales, garage sales, rummage sales, church bazaars, salad luncheons, raffles, chili suppers, pancake breakfasts, house parties... every where you turn, there's another opportunity to part with your dollars for a worthy cause. As a fundraising consultant, I've often wondered why organizing fundraising events -- something that's so familiar to people's every day lives -- always seems fraught with difficulties and unexpected obstacles.

I think I've finally stumbled upon the answer. It's the phenomenon of familiarity. Fundraising events are so common to people's experience, so familiar to them, that most volunteers think they don't need training ("anyone can organize a houseparty!"). And they don't think they have to spend much time thinking, planning, organizing, and checking in. It just looks so simple.

And in general, many fundraising events are fairly simple to do. The key concern here is that there is a world of difference between a good event (fairly simple to do) and a very successful event. That difference generally translates to at least a 20% to 40% difference in how much revenue is generated for the organization. That's an important difference!

The Twelve Building Blocks

Every fundraising event has its own unique qualities. Each has its own unique appeal. Each has its own unique Achilles heel. Nevertheless, when it comes to the processes for planning and organizing, most fundraising events have many commonalities. This handout focuses on the crucial behind the scenes planning processes that build the foundation for a fundraising event's success. The more of the building blocks you use, the more solid your foundation will be.

#1. Picking the Right Leadership

Every successful fundraising event has a committed, enthusiastic, energetic leader who heads up the event committee. This is someone who really understands the mechanics of events planning, is great at delegating responsibility, is effective at enthusing volunteers, and is especially good at checking in with people and making sure they are on track with their assignments.

#2. Prioritizing Event Objectives

Not all fundraising events have the same objectives. Some are geared to giving an organization increased visibility in the community. Some are geared toward reaching out to new funding audiences and introducing the organization to them. Some are simply geared to making as much money as possible, and that's it. Some events seek to accomplish several objectives: a group wants to raise money, attract new supporters and increase its visibility in the community. Before

planning goes very far, it's crucial to clearly establish what is the top priority for the event, and then develop a workplan to ensure that the top priority gets top attention, and that the other objective do not undermine the most important one.

#3. Choosing the Right Event

This is never as straightforward as it ought to be. Many considerations come into play.

- Is there a good match between the cost for participants, and the financial capabilities of the audience(s) to be invited?
- Are the scale and complexity of the event in line with the capabilities of the volunteers available to organize it?
- Will the amount of time it takes to organize and promote the event fit with the deadline for when it needs to occur?
- Will the event itself -- its activities, refreshments, featured attractions, location, etc. -- be the right draw to attract the priority audience(s)?

#4. Establishing an Effective Committee Structure

The core committee that plans and oversees the organizing of the event should include the chairs of all the subcommittees. Those subcommittees will typically include food and beverages; program/entertainment; publicity; ticket sales; and set-up/clean-up. The subcommittee chairs play the lead role in selecting the members of their respective subcommittees.

#5. Recruiting the Right Volunteers

It's always a great deal when the volunteers who are available are the volunteers who are needed. All too often event committees and subcommittees will recruit volunteers according to who is available and has time, without giving adequate consideration to whether they will match up with the tasks for the event. The core leadership group for the event needs to first complete enough planning activities to be able to determine what will be the major task areas, what skills will be needed, and what networks should be accessed. Then recruiting the right volunteers becomes a much easier task.

#6. Lining Up the Board of Directors

If the majority of the volunteers organizing the event are not members of the Board of Directors, then it is important to get the Board's attention early on, and line up their support. This entails:

- having all of them get the date on their calendars and pledge to attend;
- getting them to be community ambassadors for the event -- talking the event up among friends, and at meetings they attend;
- selling a minimum number of tickets or recruiting a minimum number of attendees; personally bringing someone new;
- helping solve problems and brainstorm to identify resources needed for the event; and
- working the crowd at the event -- making people feel welcome, promoting the organization, assessing participants' interest in the organization, and bringing the data back to the organization.

#7. Picking the Right Audience(s) Early

First things first. Determine whether this is an event to raise additional funds from existing supporters, or whether this is an event to raise new money from new sources. These two objectives are not mutually exclusive. It can be very compatible and appropriate to have a strong emphasis on recruiting both kinds of audiences. In order to recruit the right people to the ticket

sales/outreach subcommittee, it's very important early on to identify priority audiences for your event. The more specific you can be about the audiences, the better. Do you want to attract:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> downtown business owners? | <input type="checkbox"/> owners of construction firms? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> educators? | <input type="checkbox"/> government employees? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> realtors? | <input type="checkbox"/> doctors, dentists, lawyers? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> social service providers? | <input type="checkbox"/> stockbrokers, bankers financial advisors? |

Potential new supporters are a different audience to reach than existing supporters. New supporters generally need to be educated about the organization as well as convinced to come to the event. This dual mission is usually accomplished more effectively by volunteers who are well known by members of their respective target audience.

#8. Setting the Right Date and Timetable

Set the date for the event to allow yourself enough time to do the early planning, recruit the right volunteers, organize all parts of it well, and promote it intensively. Generally try to allow 3 to 4 months between when you first start recruiting the core committee, and when the event will be held. In choosing the actual date, don't forget to check the "community calendar" to make sure that there are minimal potential conflicts that would divert your priority attendees -- and then get your event on the community calendar.

#9. Developing a Detailed Workplan and Timelines

Volunteers work best when there is maximum clarity about what is expected of them, and what the deadlines are for accomplishing their assignments. This means developing a written list of all the major tasks, organized by subcommittee, with very clear deadlines. Not only will this minimize potential confusion and/or misunderstandings, it will also make it possible to detect emerging problems and institute corrective action before serious damage can happen.

#10. Playing the Check-in Game

When it comes to organizing fundraising events, people should assume that Murphy's Law ("whatever can go wrong, will go wrong") is alive and well. In fact, they should really assume that Murphy was an optimistic. Regular check-ins on progress being made between planning meetings are a necessity. They should be done in enough time before the next planning meeting so that if corrective steps are needed, there's time to put them in place. The event committee chair checks in with all the subcommittee chairs, and the subcommittee chairs check in with all the subcommittee members who have important tasks.

#11. Having an Outside Review

Most fundraising events are a myriad of details. It's easy to get so caught up in all the details to the point where it becomes difficult to step back and objectively look at the whole picture. That's when it can be very helpful to have an experienced fundraiser -- preferably from outside the organization -- come look at the plans for the event with a fresh eye.

- Is anything not there that ought to be?
- Do any parts of the plan not make sense?
- Are there missed opportunities?
- Has enough time been allocated for accomplishing each component?

Hopefully this review can be done at no cost for the organization by offering to provide the same service in return.

#12. Preparing a Written Evaluation with Recommendations

Successful fundraising events are repeated. If not annually, then every other year. With any fundraising event, mistakes are made, lessons are learned, new resources are identified, new volunteers are recruited -- and in a year's time, much can be forgotten. The best thing to do after a fundraising event is prepare a written evaluation with file notes about what was done, and any recommendations for how to do it better. The event committee chair should prepare this written report as though she or he will be going to a remote isle in the Caribbean with no telephone, and next year's committee chair won't be able to call with questions.

#13. Writing Those Very Important Thank You Notes

The proverbial "baker's dozen" -- one more building block than you were promised. Like the written evaluation, this step has to do with positioning for next year's events. I don't think I've ever met a volunteer who complained of being thanked too much, but I've met a lot who have complained of not being thanked enough, or not even being thanked at all. It's not just all the hard working volunteers, it's all those who donated food, drinks, door prizes and other tangibles. They, too, are deserving of that special thank you.

Putting "Fun" Into Organizing the Fundraising Event

One last note.

There are few things as deadly in fundraising as a project that's all work and no play. One of the unwritten parts of the leadership job description is to make sure that people have fun. If they are enjoying their volunteer work, they will do a much better job at it. And they probably will be willing to do it again. Picking the right mix of personalities for the committee, picking enjoyable places for meetings, arranging for tasty snacks at meetings, and running meetings that are productive and enjoyable are all ways to inject fun.

You'll be glad you did.