

Event Planning – Questions To Answer Before You Beginⁱ

1. Do you have clear goals for staging a special event?

Is the purpose to raise money? Assuming one of your purposes is to raise funds, it is important to determine when the funds are needed and what your financial net goal is. The strategy to raise significant dollars will be considerably different than one to generate a few hundred dollars. As a basic rule of thumb, match the event to your financial needs and timeline.

Is the purpose to generate new donor prospects or volunteers?

In most successful fundraising events, one of the goals is to attract new volunteers and money to support the organization. Otherwise you may be redirecting money previously given to the organization through other avenues and overtaxing current volunteers.

Is the purpose to increase public awareness of your organization?

If you want to increase the visibility of the organization, the event should be held where many people are exposed to the name and mission of your organization and great efforts should be aimed at good media coverage.

Is the purpose to bring attention to your cause or mission?

Too often the population served by the organization is confused with the audience for an event. Although the two should be compatible with regards to the basic values of the organization, the audience of your event may be significantly different than the clients you serve.

David Nelson, author of *Getting the Payoff from Special Events*, distinguishes between two major types of events — those that raise more money and those that raise more public awareness. He divides these into Type A and Type B. Type A events generally raise more funds and gain less public awareness and have the following characteristics:

- High individual cost to participate
- Smaller attendance
- Lower administrative and advertising investment
- More donor prospects
- Greater loyalty to the organization by those attending

Type B events generally raise visibility but may require high investment of time for the financial return to the organization and have the following characteristics:

- Low individual cost to participate
- Larger attendance/higher visibility
- Higher administrative and advertising investment

- Fewer donor prospects
- Less loyalty to the organization by those attending

2. **Do you have access to appropriate attendees, sponsors and underwriters?**

Wanting to stage an event will not guarantee success unless you have connections to and the interest of appropriate attendees and financial underwriters.

Ask yourself: *Who would be the natural choice of event participants for the organization?*

It is also important to know if any other community activities will be competing with your event for the audience, volunteers and donors you will be targeting. There may be other activities going on in a community at the same time, but the important issue is whether your target group will have too many competing activities on or around the same time of your event. Many communities have groups that keep community calendars. Check out other potential competing activities and make certain that as soon as you know the date of the event you get it on the calendar and get the word out so that others will not plan competing events.

3. **What event can meet the goals and reach the targeted market?**

Most events will fall under one of the following categories:

- **Audience Participation Events** require that you attract people, generally through ticket sales. Examples are dances, decorator showcases, art appraisals, celebrity cook-offs. For some organizations these are perfect events because they have a dedicated group of volunteers who enjoy the social nature of sponsoring such an event and the collective contacts to create good press coverage and sell many tickets.
- **Food and Drink Events** feature a meal or have special food served. Examples include wine-and-food events, "roasts" of special people, luncheons with fashion shows, events featuring ethnic foods, tea parties and restaurant openings. These generally require extensive preparation and attract people through ticket sales. Many of these types of fundraisers become signature events for an organization and are held annually, with potentially great financial returns. The costs to sponsor these events are closely tied to how much of the food and beverages can be donated for the event. As with all such major events, people attending may consider this their major gift to the organization for the year. Thus you may be simply getting their annual gift at an event rather than through a solicitation. This is not necessarily bad, particularly if event costs are low. People are more

likely to donate to a cause in a social setting, for example, while competing for auction items, than they are to respond to direct, one-on-one solicitation. This is particularly true in the case of auctions when items are donated by well-known community residents.

- **Holiday and Special Occasion Events** are held to celebrate the season while raising funds for the organization. However, since volunteer time is often limited around holidays, preparations for the event should be scheduled as far ahead as possible. Events range from doing a day of gift wrapping for donations, to organizations sponsoring a community July Fourth Fireworks.
- **Merchandise Events** are those that feature the sale of products or services. Examples are antique shows, flea markets, book and plant sales, arts and crafts fairs, and garage sales. You can create your own or rent a space at a show. Organizations that make the most money on these types of special events are often those that coordinate a large event and reap a portion of the profits and entry fees of all participants.
- **Entertainment Events** probably carry the highest risk but can also produce some of the highest returns. Success is affected by the cost or donation of the "name" entertainment, how many tickets must be sold to break even, how much money is needed up front, and whether there are back-out clauses with facilities if you determine an event will not be profitable. Weather can also be a factor if the entertainment is to be out of doors. Probably the safest of these types of events is a preview or a premier showing of a play or popular movie, where the organization reaps the profits from the evening's entertainment. A current fundraising trend is for groups to partner with one another in sponsoring events.
- **Athletic Events** such as marathons and 10K runs are increasingly popular. However, there is now great competition for participants because of the proliferation of so many excellent events. Organizations that have successfully attached themselves to marathon events that contribute funds to nonprofit causes have reaped significant funds with minimal labor. To set up a local athletic event, takes considerable contacts and should only be considered if you have access to the talent that will make certain the event is professionally managed. Large athletic clubs in your community are a good place to start. Most of the money is raised through pledges and you need a way to ensure that the pledge money is given to the runner, walker or biker prior to the event. Risk management and insurance have become significant issues in athletic events, further substantiating the need for the event to be proficiently run.
- **Non-events.** These are invitations for your donor to stay at home and pay for the privilege of not attending an event that is never staged. Some of these invitations have been very cleverly presented, requesting that you contribute the costs of renting a tuxedo, the new

gown, the ticket, the purchase of raffles, the limo and any other possible expense you might have incurred had there been an event. You can check off which items you would have purchased and write a check to the organization for that amount. Sometimes the organization plays on the fact that you must be tired of going to events and thus they are doing you a favor by allowing you to stay home. Some include a tea bag and suggest that you have a nice cup of tea by the fire. It is a clever fundraising method but be certain that the mailing goes to a broad range of people, not just your members, or it may be perceived as your annual drive. If so, you are redirecting money, rather than earning new money.

4. **Is the event appropriate to the organization's purpose and mission?**

Although the participants attending an event are frequently not the organization's clients, it is important that the theme of the event compliment the services and programs of your organization. The most creative events incorporate the organization's mission into the event theme.

5. **Is the staffing adequate?**

Before committing to a fundraising event, be certain that both volunteer and salaried staffing are adequate.

Is there an effective leader, agreeable to chair the event? Often an event will have two chairs with distinctly different jobs: a celebrity chair and an organizing chair. The celebrity chair agrees to be associated with the event, make some important contacts, sign some letters endorsing the event or encouraging people to attend and will also attend the event. The organizing chair coordinates the considerable details associated with producing an event.

Is there an adequate pool of volunteers to plan and carry out the event? As with all volunteer positions, each volunteer should be doing a job that brings mutual benefit to both the volunteer and the event.

Has the amount of staff time that will be needed for the event been clearly established? Those planning for the event should present a realistic proposal regarding the projected time that staff will be supporting the event. Determine if this timing conflicts with other known busy times for the organization. As much as possible, event chairpersons should arrange for the preparation details to be handled separately from the daily running of the organizations.

If the event involves selling tickets to get people to attend, do you have people (board, volunteers, staff) who can be successful at this? Don't just assume that somehow tickets distributed to board and volunteers will automatically get sold.

6. Is the projected budget aligned with your goals?

After expenses, do you project a profit that will fulfill your financial goals? Does the budget give actual costs for all possible major expenses and does it reflect opportunities for underwriting and sponsorships that could significantly lower actual costs? It is helpful before agreeing to stage an event to get some major underwriters on board. This will play a role in convincing your board to give the green light to the event.

Costs for insurance, taxes and permits should be researched before the decision is finalized — not come as a surprise when you are in the middle of planning. Often these line items alone determine whether an event is financially feasible. Some organizations have insurance policies, which, for a small extra premium, cover an event, or you can buy a rider policy for the event only. Always get advice from your insurance agent.

Does the organization have the cash that will be needed up front to put on this event? The organization may need to take the money from a reserve account, as the money from events generally comes in at the very end of the effort. This is another point at which major sponsors can be very helpful in providing funds to underwrite your early expenses. Or you may alter how you market your tickets.

Is there an escape plan if activities and planning are not proceeding as scheduled? In major event planning there should be plans to cut your losses by a certain date by canceling the event if most indicators point in that direction. It is sometimes better to cancel than to carry through with plans, particularly if your losses will be significantly larger if you proceed.

7. Are there clear expectations of the work for the event required by paid staff and board members?

As an event is being discussed it is important to be very clear about expectations of the staff, board members, and any volunteers who will become involved. Do not allow poor planning to leave roles and responsibilities unclear. In small, grassroots organizations there is a tendency for everyone to pitch in and help out; but you must analyze the true cost of the event when this is occurring. Not only may the event be costing too much, your mission and cause may suffer as time is redirected from client services to events. The sooner you can build a network of reliable, talented volunteers who enjoy event planning, the better your organization will be served.

8. Will the event have a planning/oversight task force or steering committee, including appropriate representation from the staff, board and volunteers?

Those who are considering an event need to have key members of a task force selected. This leadership team will guide and drive the event and will have a great effect on its eventual success.

9. Is there adequate time to prepare for the event?

Major fundraising events take considerable planning time. It is best to allow one year for planning, with the evaluation session often being the first planning session for the following year. Smaller events or ones in which you simply participate may take less time, but they will invariably bring in less money and may be time-intensive for a short period of time. Events are generally not a good strategy if significant money is needed within a short time frame. It is important to consider whether this event has the potential to be repeated and expanded. Often the first year will take considerably more time and effort than subsequent years. Thus, if you know that the event will only be possible to stage once, it should have the promise of great returns.

10. Will the benefits of this event or activity be worth the time and effort put in by staff and supporters of the organization?

Ultimately this is the bottom line for deciding whether or not to sponsor an event. Analyzing the organization's goals for the event, one must ask, "Is this event the most economical and effective way to meet these goals?" We must be determined at the outset that time will be spent productively and judiciously. Too many boards never discuss this ratio and end up with a considerable up-front investment of time that does not bring significant return to the organization. It's critical not to overlook this issue. However, the true benefits of many events come after they are over, when new prospects have been acquainted with your organization and are now possible candidates to assist your program as volunteers, donors or both.

ⁱ Resource Center: Corporation for National and Community Service