

# To Event or Not to Event...

## 3 Great Tips for Hosting Great Special Events at Your Nonprofit

### **Dear *do good*:**

In June, we held our first ever annual dinner. It was lots of work and didn't raise much (if you count staff time, we actually lost money). However, the event was pretty well-received and we already have some folks asking if we'll do it again. Our board was disappointed that we didn't raise tons of money and says to nix the idea. A couple want to try something different event-wise next year to raise more money (a golf outing was brought up). Do you have any advice for us?

**- Caught Between a Board & a Hard Place**



### Dear **Board & Hard Place**:

This is a very common – and excellent – question. Special events, like annual dinners (and golf outings and \_\_\_-a-thons) present both unique opportunities and big challenges for nonprofits.

On their face, special events seem like a good idea – everyone's doing them, right? But events done without the proper planning and without realistic expectations or goals, can leave organizations and their teams feeling deflated and frustrated.

So, what to do? Here are three key pieces of special event advice for you.

### **1. Consider events as friend-raisers first and fundraisers second.**

Events are *really* excellent places for powerful one-on-one conversations and donor cultivations to take place. They are an opportunity for relationships to be built and strengthened, and for powerful testimonials and stories to be told – in person. Outside of a one-on-one meeting with each donor, it's hard to imagine another forum where such emotional connections can be formed with your mission and clients.

When you build relationships right – authentically – you are building your organization both short-term and long-term. If you're able to pique the emotions of those attending by creating a meaningful journey and experience at the event – sharing motivating, moving stories of lives and communities changed – I promise you will create lasting memories for attendees. And if you follow up right by continuing the relationship well and engaging in sound fundraising practices, you'll see increased donations and engagement from attendees into the future.

### **2. Think of every detail and aspect from an invitee and attendee point-of-view.**

I was at a big fundraising dinner once with a friend who had never heard of the organization before. Upon arrival, not a single person greeted us at the door. Not one. We were not given a program or any instruction on where the auction was (a separate room), where the bar was (another room), or where to sit. We wandered a bit, trying to make eye-contact with anyone at all. We finally claimed two seats at

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Laura Huth-Rhoades, Chief ChangeMaker  
906 East Main || Lowell Michigan || 49331  
217-778-1687 || [laura@dogoodconsulting.org](mailto:laura@dogoodconsulting.org)  
[www.dogoodconsulting.org](http://www.dogoodconsulting.org)

a table, but no one at the table greeted us or said hello. We realized during their conversation that two were board members and one was a former board member. They all talked to one another and never once – not once – did any of them talk to us or ask our names.

This might sound like an extreme example, but it's a true story.

Have you ever taken your event's journey through the eyes of someone there? Have you envisioned how the event should ideally play out, then work backward to ensure that every single "i" is dotted and all "t's" are crossed?

When an invitee receives any communication about your event, like the mailed invitation or a Facebook post, what will their first impression be? Put yourself in their shoes and see what they see. When they are at your event, what are they experiencing? Feeling? Learning? Doing? Is there any moment during the event when they are bored, confused, alone, or disengaged? If so, what are you going to do about it?

Before they leave, do your guests feel more emotionally-connected to your work than before? Did they take the actions – now or later – that you wanted them to? Donate? Tell a friend? Join your board? Volunteer? Become a mentor?

When they leave, what are they thinking? Feeling? Knowing? Will they be back next year? Will they tell a friend? Bring a friend? Make a larger gift?

Don't get caught up in big check-offs (Make an invitation! Get auction items! Create centerpieces!) that you become attendee-myopic. What if the invitation I got was instead hand-addressed by a volunteer (or client) making me feel unique and special? Do I really want to browse another auction pretending to buy stuff I don't really want or need? Or do I want to take a journey through posters, pictures, stories, and even real testimonials of the work and impact of this group I'm here to support? Do I really want to look at flowers in a clear vase in the middle of the table? Or would I rather see art created by your students and clients sitting in the middle of my table that show me the value of your work?

As you plan, put yourself in their shoes and do everything in a way that attracts them to want to participate in your event, have an unforgettable time, to come back next time, and to bring a friend when they do.

### **3. Create a metric-driven outline before you commit to any event.**

Beyond just the funds you want to raise, think about things like: how many people you want to attend (and how many you need to invite to actually achieve that); what the key take-aways and actionables are for attendees (what they should know, feel, do, and think); and how many people are needed to do what (board, staff, volunteers) to really make a stellar event happen. There are lots of others to consider, but this gets you started thinking about the realities of pulling off meaningful, mission-focused, and results-driven events. If you can honestly look at the outline you've created and feel confident in what you see, then proceeding is likely alright. If not, I would urge caution and review scale, goals, human resources, timeline, and overall viability.

Remember: there are a lot of moving parts that go in to any special event, and no event is the same. If you want more custom advise for your event, or help planning something you have coming up, contact me to talk more about how I might be able to help.

Events are an important friend- and fundraising tool. You owe it to yourself (and all your clients) to make every event you hold the very best that it can be!