

## Reasons (other than fundraising) to Hold Events

This document augments *Boards on Fire*, page 74

By Susan Howlett

### **I discourage my clients from putting on big events if their primary goal is to raise money.**

There are much better ways to raise money that cost less, take less ‘people time’, and generate more net income. But people insist on clinging to their beloved events. They always say, “But we get so much more out of them than money...”

Fine, I say. Tell me precisely what that is, make it a goal, quantify that goal, and measure whether you reached it. Otherwise, events are a poor way to spend precious time and money. If you focused the board, staff and volunteers on donor cultivation and stewardship instead, you’d make far more money. I submit that if you can’t name what else you’re getting out of your events, and quantify that, then it isn’t enough justification for the human capital you’re spending.

Here are some options for non-monetary rationales for having an event.

- **To attract new stakeholders**, who might not respond to your mission if they heard about it through direct mail, email, phones, or their workplace campaign. (If this is a goal you choose, then be very specific about which stakeholder pools: members of a particular faith tradition that’s traditionally been connected to your mission? members of a service club where people are used to giving joyfully? members of a particular ethnic group or profession that is underrepresented among your donors, but is related to your work? Be really specific – don’t broadcast a ‘y’all come’ invitation to anyone who’s breathing.)
- **To get current stakeholders more involved** in the organization, as event volunteers. (An old client of mine said she purposely created events that required hundreds of volunteers, because if people had a role to play, 1) they’d show up; 2) they would probably bring someone with them because people seldom go to events alone; and 3) they would likely tell ten other people that they were going. So her main event goals were about using volunteers strategically and satisfyingly, so they would have a great experience with the organization. She also offered people increasing levels of responsibility with each year they returned.)
- **To upgrade current donors** to a higher gift level, by segmenting the invitation list to a particular gift amount, then encouraging them to give a larger gift by linking it to a discreet unit of service or a benefit to the donor. (imagine asking only \$100 donors and inviting them to give \$250)
- **To encourage current donors to give to you in a new way**, like making monthly gifts through their workplace campaign or online, or putting you in their will. Or you could use an event to entice volunteers or beneficiaries to become donors too.

- **To retrieve lapsed donors** – people who may need a little more personal attention or a closer connection to the mission to renew their financial support.
- **To reach out to a new constituency.** Maybe you are looking for more people from a particular geographic area, age group, political group or ethnic population, and tailoring an event to their interests might get them more connected to your work.
- **To attract corporate sponsorship.** Say there are some companies you'd like to approach and you don't fit their philanthropic guidelines, but they might spend advertising dollars to be in front of the demographic profile that your audience represents.
- **To build community** among your current supporters. Someone once told me that “parades are for the marchers,” which suggests that sometimes we have to gather “our people” together to remind them why they've chosen to be in our parade, and reinforce their commitment to our work.
- **To build – or test – leadership.** Perhaps there's someone you're considering for the board, but you aren't sure whether they are on fire about the mission, whether they can motivate others to volunteer or give, whether they are good at follow through, whether they're team players, or compelling representatives of your organization. If you put them in charge of a subcommittee, you can watch their behavior and see if they'd be suitable.
- **To position the organization or issue in a particular light.** At one point, all the AIDS-serving organizations in our city got together to reinforce the message: AIDS isn't over. Another organization wanted to position themselves as politically influential, so they held a particular type of event that would attract potential collaborators and elected officials.
- **To establish credibility among a particular constituency.** People might have thought your organization wasn't culturally competent, or was inaccessible to people with disabilities, or wasn't politically savvy, but you could change that by the type of event you held.
- **To launch a new initiative,** a new program, a new office, new board or staff.
- **To recognize, thank or celebrate** certain constituents, such as board members, staff people, volunteers, donors, corporate sponsors, collaborators, clients who have reached a milestone, etc.
- **To educate or inform** stakeholders about a new aspect of your work.
- **To raise awareness.** This is often the most frequent rationale for putting on events, but I always insist that my clients articulate precisely WHOM they want to reach with this coverage, and WHY. You don't want media coverage for the sake of media coverage – it needs to be directed at a particular segmentation and for a particular reason. I suggest that people target a small segmentation, say people who belong to a particular service club or denomination, because of their proclivity to volunteer or contribute. And then have a specific thing in mind that you want them to do as a result of being aware of you – make an in-kind gift? volunteer? call their legislator? take a tour? – be clear about WHY you want the awareness, or your time and effort will be wasted.

- **To decrease the amount of staff time** devoted to events or to lower the cost-per-dollar-raised.

These types of goals will drive many decisions, such as where you hold it, who will be invited and how, what will be served, who will speak. They're GREAT event goals! 😊

Once you've decided what your non-monetary goals are, you need to prioritize them (one must trump the others so people can make snap decisions in the middle of the event) and then quantify them so you know whether you achieved them. Media coverage? How many column inches in which publications, or how many seconds of air time on which stations? Sponsorships? How many at what levels will be a success? Then be sure to measure how you did when you're done!

The most important discussion to have around events is whether they are the optimal use of your organization's precious resources. Remember, if you focused the same number of hours of board, staff and volunteer time that you're currently spending on events on donor cultivation and stewardship instead, you'd make WAY more money, with much less effort.