
AFTER THE LIGHTS GO OUT:

TURNING YOUR SPECIAL EVENT INTO FUTURE GOLD

BY GAIL S. MELTZER, CFRE

Once again, you've just spent a good part of the past year on your annual special event. You've been working 60-hour weeks. As the event successfully concludes and you're wrapping up the thank you's to volunteers, donors, sponsors, attendees and staff, you see the light at the end of the tunnel.

You may be thinking, "Whew, I can finally put this behind me and try to catch up on all the other essential things I've put aside to get this blasted thing done."

Wrong!

Your work has just begun — and I don't mean on next year's event, although that's probably already staring you in the face too. What you and your volunteers do after the event can have a profound impact on your development program, especially your major gifts effort. Now is the time to take advantage of the scores of opportunities to enhance your position in the community and cultivate your major gifts prospects that your event provides. If you don't do that, you are truly leaving money on the table.

Special events are important vehicles for developing relationships with your donors. They are often one of the few occasions where we are face-to-face with our supporters, and the social aspect of events lends itself to building a stronger connection between your donors and your organization. In addition, there is always the chance that among your guests or supporters may be a donor who has the capacity to give a really significant gift. The cultivation activities you undertake after the event may just be the reason that gift ultimately comes your way.

FOLLOW-UP TOUCHES

In this article I suggest several ways to follow up with your guests, vendors, sponsors, volunteers, and other donors to turn your event into the start of something big.

Guests and Participants

Let's start with the guest or participant list. It may be obvious, but it's worth mentioning: be sure that everyone who came to the event or participated in some way is on or is added to your mailing list. When you have verified how much money was raised, send them a warm, personalized letter thanking each for their attendance and letting them know the amount and how your organization will use it.

Be as specific as possible regarding how the funds directly benefit the people or projects you serve. This letter should go out no later than two weeks after the event. You'd be amazed how many organizations don't do this.

The letter can be signed by the event chair(s) and/or the board president and executive director. It's an easy way to make the participants feel glad they took the time and spent the money to support your organization.

For guests who are new to your organization, add a welcome to the letter and include a newsletter and some promotional materials. Let them know about regular tours, educational opportunities, or other events if you have them.

If you wish, you can include a very brief questionnaire about the event, providing room for any comments or suggestions the guest might have. Enclose a return envelope. If you already know next year's date, indicate that in the letter with a note to "Save the Date."

When creating your mailing list for this follow-up packet, be sure to include anyone who sent a donation but couldn't attend and any vendors or sponsors who helped make the event happen but didn't attend. Of course, don't send the questionnaire to these recipients.

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Major Gifts Prospects

Take your guest/donor list and sit down with a small group of knowledgeable volunteers (board members or others) to discuss the names, especially those new to your organization.

Identify the best prospects for major gifts from among that list. These may be existing donors who have made smaller gifts in the past or individuals new to your organization. Integrate those names into your current list of individuals in your major gifts planning process. That process should include developing a long-term cultivation plan for your best major gifts donors or prospects. If you don't have such a list, start it now.

For each event donor or prospect, determine who the best "partner" is to manage the cultivation process. While you as the staff member will oversee all of the activities, an appropriate peer volunteer can be in charge of "working the plan" with you for a particular donor or prospect. Schedule a variety of "touches" to take place during the next year: a lunch with the peer, a breakfast with the executive director, a tour of your facility, a phone call to update the person on some issue or event, an invitation to join a committee or perhaps eventually the board, a note of congratulations on some achievement, involvement in your planned giving or estate planning educational program, and so on.

If you are a one-person shop or part of a very small development staff, just pick a number of individuals you feel is manageable — perhaps ten or twenty. There is very little other work you can be doing that is more important than this. As in any cultivation process, listen, listen, listen. This is the period where you can gather the information you need to help you identify your donor or prospect's real interests and passions and bring him or her closer to your organization and its mission.

Corporate Sponsors

What do you do to keep your precious corporate sponsors happy? No doubt at the event they got plenty of recognition. Here are some other things you can do to enhance the relationship.

Are they listed on your Web site as a sponsor? If your policies and procedures allow it, can your supporters click on the sponsor's logo and go right to their Web site? Driving prospects to their site is a big plus.

Schedule a lunch or breakfast for your executive director with the sponsor's CEO and/or the decision-maker for corporate underwriting. Think of creative ways your organization can provide a valuable service to the company.

If the issues you address in your work might be of interest to the sponsor's employees, you could offer to do an occasional brown bag lunch lecture at the place of business.

See if you can help expose the sponsor again to the event audience. For example, if your major corporate sponsor is a bank or trust company, perhaps you could arrange for it to host a workshop on some aspect of estate planning at a special opportunity only for those who supported your event.

Media

Just as you cultivate donors and prospects, you will want to cultivate the media so that you will get important publicity in the future. You do this by thanking any media that gave you pre- and post-event publicity and media representatives who came to the event. Send event photos and a news release to your full

media list soon after the event. Be sure also to send copies of any post-event coverage in the print media to the appropriate supporters.

See if you can quickly get on any local radio or TV shows to talk about an event-related special-interest story or about the impact the event has on your capacity to serve the community. Use the event publicity as an opportunity to position you or your executive director as a "go-to authority" for information on your area of expertise. Building relationships with local media in this way can be invaluable, as your organization's name begins to appear more and more often in print and "on the air."

Journal Advertisers and In-Kind Donors

If you have a journal or ad book associated with your event, send a copy to every advertiser who didn't attend the event, along with a thank-you note. Better yet, get a group of volunteers together who will hand-deliver the ad book to thank the supporter in person. When the time is right, be sure to request another ad for next year's event. Send them a copy of their previous ad with your request letter.

Do the same for your in-kind donors (perhaps you had an auction and had lots of items donated, or you got food or other materials donated for the event). Give them a copy of the ad journal, which, presumably, thanks them for their donation. Again, if a volunteer can hand-deliver it, that's another great touch.

Be sure to add the names and addresses of your advertisers and in-kind donors to your mailing list. Have your

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volunteers review these names to determine if any are potential major gifts prospects.

Committee Volunteers

There may be some members of the committee who helped but were unable to attend the event, didn't make a donation and/or are new to your organization. Be sure they are thanked, told of the impact of their efforts, are on your mailing list, and that their names are also on the prospect review list.

If your event committee is mostly women, as many are, think about creating a "giving circle" to encourage the members to become more involved with your organization and more serious and thoughtful givers. Many communities and organizations have had great success with these types of women's groups, whose purpose is to educate women and empower them to understand the potential and impact of increased involvement and giving.

If you are unfamiliar with this concept, check with your community foundation or do some research through the Association of Fundraising Professionals' resource center (800-688-3463, or www.afpnet.org; free to members, \$50 charge per topic for non-members). Sandra Shaw-Hardy's book, *Creating a Women's Giving Circle*, put out by the Women's Philanthropy Institute in Madison, WI (2000) has helpful information, as do Women's Philanthropy Institute, www.women-philanthropy.org; Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, www.givingforum.org; and Women's Funding Network, www.wfnet.org.

Current Donors and Board Members

Your donors, board members, and other volunteers who were unable to attend the event should still get a follow-up so they know what they missed. Send a letter indicating how much fun and how successful the event was, include copies of any print media coverage, indicate the funds raised and how they will be used, urge the individu-

als to go to your Web site to learn more about the event, give them next year's date if you have it, and let them know you hope they will be a part of it!

Web site

Don't forget to use your Web site to maximum benefit. Put photos of the event on your Web site and of course indicate the amount raised. Add quotes from people who attended and from clients who benefited from the funds (with their permission, of course). Tell people how they can still donate to that particular project even though they weren't involved with the event. Make sure you understand the regulations in each state regarding appeals for contributions on your Web site. It may be necessary for your organization to register with other states in order to solicit funds from prospective donors there. (You can find out more about soliciting donations online at www.muridae.com/nporegulation.)

Ask people who visit your site to give you their name and address if they want to be included on the invitation list for next year. As mentioned above, be sure sponsors have an opportunity to be linked to your site, if this is appropriate.

TO SUM UP...

No doubt you can think of many more touches that are unique to your organization. The point is to think big, think beyond the event itself. Yes, it's important that it raised money. But take advantage of the scores of opportunities to enhance your position in the community and expand your major gifts program as a result of the event. Take a deep breath, relax for a day — maybe two — then get to it! **GFJ**

GAIL S. MELTZER, CFRE, IS PRESIDENT OF FUND RAISING ADVANTAGE, INC., A FT. LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA FIRM THAT HELPS NONPROFITS STRENGTHEN DONOR LOYALTY, ENHANCE BOARD DEDICATION AND EXPAND COMMUNITY COMMITMENT. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT GSMFUND@HOTMAIL.COM.