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PUBLISHER EMERITA

Kim Klein

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Stephanie Roth

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

Jennifer Emiko Boyden

SENIOR EDITOR

Nancy Adess

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Chris Martin

COVER PHOTO

Jay Jao, jayjao.com

For subscription inquiries and to request permission to reprint Journal articles, please contact:
monica@grassrootsfundraising.org

To advertise and to submit an article idea, please contact:
jennifer@grassrootsfundraising.org

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GIFT: 1904 Franklin Street, Suite 705
Oakland, CA 94612
PHONE: 888.458.8588 (TOLL-FREE)
510.452.4520 (SF BAY AREA)
FAX: 510.452.2122
info@grassrootsfundraising.org
www.grassrootsfundraising.org

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Special Events...Is Now the Time?

By Laurie J. Earp, Guest Editor

I AM HONORED TO BE THIS ISSUE'S GUEST EDITOR. As a long-time event planner and consultant, I have been involved in events that have ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous, from those that were wildly successful to those that missed the mark. What I've learned has informed what you'll find in this special issue of the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*.

Because only so much content can be squeezed into any one issue of the *Journal*, please take advantage of the extensive collection of articles on the topic of special events on GIFT's website (grassrootsfundraising.org), which can be downloaded for a nominal fee of \$3.00. In addition, I have helped GIFT compile a special collection of 10 of the most useful (past) articles on special events into one downloadable PDF for just \$10.00 (a \$30 value).

In these financially challenging times, many people are asking whether or not to continue producing special events. They're wondering if all the time, money and effort they put into an event might be better spent on other fundraising strategies. Certainly, it is always important to weigh the pros and cons of events and to make sure they fit into your overall fundraising plan. I can't recommend whether your organization should produce an event this year, but here are reasons to continue considering events in your fundraising plans, especially in times like these.

Events present an opportunity for people to gather. They help reassure our stakeholders—members, donors, staff and board, clients and customers—that we value our relationships with them and that we value the community-building opportunities that events provide. If you've held an annual event, your donors and friends may be looking forward to the time they are able to get together with organizational leaders and constituents. If you have a banner year to celebrate, do it! It can present a great opportunity for a funding surge and a chance to present your case to a wider audience. Events are "organic"—they grow as an expression of the organization hosting them and the individuals involved in their planning. Have fun with your event—and so will your guests and their friends. Consider carefully, however, what the event looks like—do you need to host bottles of wine at each table? Is that extra vellum sheet of paper in your invitation package essential?

In this issue, we hope you will be inspired by the case studies presented by Rona Fernandez and Elmer Roldan on successful events that reflect the culture of their organizations and are wide reaching to their constituent base and beyond. They dispel the need to host a "rubber-chicken dinner" and explain how to establish achievable fundraising goals. They remind you not to be daunted if your organization does not have resources to bring in celebrities. Instead, look inward at the relationships you do have and how to expand on them. And take advice from Nzinga Koné-Miller on how you can use available technology to strengthen relationships and increase the number of event participants. My article will walk you through the "nuts and bolts" of event planning and give you the tools to create your own successful event.

I hope these articles will be helpful to you as you move your organization through its first or next of many special events.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laurie".



The Nuts and Bolts of Organizing Great Special Events

By Laurie J. Earp

WHY SHOULD YOUR ORGANIZATION HOST a special event?

It seems that everywhere you turn you hear about them—a milestone Celebration, a Gala Dinner, an Awards Luncheon, a Walk-a-thon, a Telethon, an elegant House & Garden Tour. You might wonder, “Why not us?” Or maybe your organization has been hosting an annual event of some kind for years and it has become flat (or worse) in the value it brings to your organization.

Whatever stage you are at, you need to consider the purpose of an event for your organization and what steps you might take to rejuvenate an annual event that has developed declining attendance and income or to develop a new event that will not be a drain on your financial and human resources.

For more than thirteen years, I have worked with many organizations at different stages of experience with event production. I have helped envision and execute plans for first annual events, or special one-time-only events, or for an Nth Year annual event. No matter the goal or the size and scope of the event, all events require a certain gestation and work period and the same attention to detail to produce one that is fresh and worthy of your time and energy.

In this article, I provide the tools and steps you can take to ensure that your special event meets your goals to deliver your message to a wider audience, help cultivate new leaders and donors, strengthen relationships with current and past leaders and donors, meet your financial expectations, and play an important role in your overall development plan.

Here are some questions to ask before embarking on organizing a special event:

1. Where does such an event fit into your current development

plan? What are your goals for the event?

2. Do you have the people power to put on such an event? How do you recruit a strong team?
3. What does a reasonable timeline look like to create such an event?
4. How do you get people to attend your event?
5. How do you create a budget with realistic income projections to ensure you raise the money you need?
6. How can you track your income in a concise way as you move from beginning to end?

This article addresses each of these questions to help you plan the most successful event possible for your organization.

Setting Goals for Your Event within Your Overall Fundraising Plan

Many of your stakeholders will be delighted to attend an event that brings people together in support of your organization. With enough time and careful planning your event will attract enough supporters (past, current, and future) to provide the synergy needed for a successful event. They will come for many reasons—among them, to support you, to be seen, and to network.

Think about how the event will best fit into your current development plan, and how it can enhance and support other initiatives you are working on. Consider the timing of your appeal letters, major donor drive, and how sponsorship solicitations for an event might affect your annual fundraising goals.

Another part of goal-setting includes choosing an event that allows you to stay true to your organization’s mission and core values. For example, an animal rights organization would not

have a “Ranch BBQ.” Likewise, a breast cancer organization would most likely not have an event where makeovers are provided by make-up companies producing toxin-filled products. Events are more than parties—they are an access point for current, past, and future donors and leaders to learn more about you and to meet key stakeholders. Therefore, you want your event to reflect your organization’s mission and values.

Here are the types of goals you want to clarify for your event:

- **Net Income.** Is net income a requirement for this event to be successful or are outreach and cultivation the benchmarks you would like to achieve?
- **Publicity** for your organization.
- Getting **more people** involved in your organization.
- Cultivating **new leaders.** For example, an event can provide an opportunity to engage with potential new board members.
- **Donor cultivation** and/or acquisition.

Your Event Team

Some organizations maintain full-time event staff. Others hire a consultant to lead the team. In still other organizations, events are organized by an all-volunteer team and/or your development department of one—the person who is also responsible for everything else that brings in funds to the organization. Whatever your internal make-up, you should have buy-in from your board of directors, development team (volunteer and staff), volunteers, and anyone else who has expressed an interest in supporting an event for your organization. It’s important that the event be an expression of the organization and not just of any one individual, so be sure to screen your volunteers for being good team players who can keep their eye on the prize: an event by and for your organization.

A team structure may look like the following:

Chairs

Team Chair or Co-Chairs: An individual or individuals who take the lead in seeing that other committee members get their work done and follow the task timeline. Ideally, they are volunteers, including board members, who work closely with staff and/or the consultant to oversee the event planning process and take a lead in the fundraising efforts. They are committed to the goals of the event and will be wonderful cheerleaders and workers.

Honorary Chair or Host Committee: An honorary chair or honorary host committee can add a wow-factor to an event.

Whether long-time or new, supporters are often impressed by the recognized names of elected, business, and community leaders added to these lists. But there is time involved in soliciting these people to add their names and you need to determine whether having them adds sufficient value to your event.

For example, if you are trying to reach out to the business community and there is a well-known leader who has her own circles of influence that she may be willing to invite to the event and that will be a draw to potential donors, then it is worth the effort of asking and doing necessary follow-up to secure this honorary chair. If, however, you and your team are going to spend a lot of time trying to confirm members of an honorary host committee who benefit by associating themselves with you and your mission but will not be doing much for you, then your time might be better spent soliciting sponsorships, tribute ads, ticket sales, and in-kind donations so that you achieve your fundraising goals.

Sub-Committees

Logistics: Work with the venue, entertainers, parking needs, event flow, menu, and so on.

Fundraising: Solicit sponsorships, sell tribute ads, sell tickets, solicit auction items, and handle whatever other income streams you establish for the event

Outreach/Publicity: Engage other organizations, produce press releases and PSAs, identify lists to receive invitations, send email blasts and manage other calendar and publicity opportunities.

Volunteers: Help with implementing the plan as well as day-of tasks.

Task Timeline

What kind of time do you need to achieve your goals and produce a successful event? A six-month timeline is generally sufficient to carry out all tasks related to an event and not burn out volunteers and others involved. One tool was presented by event planner Ali Vogt in her November-December 2002 *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* article, “The Details of a Special Events: How to be an Event Jedi.” There, she details the development and production of the event brochure, program, and communications, as well as when to send out sponsorship packets, invitations, and so on. The more detailed your plan, the easier it is for things not to fall through any cracks.

The following timeline organizes the tasks by the planning subcommittees described above. Of course you need to plug

Six-Month Task Timeline for a Special Event

Date	Classification	Item	To Be Done by
ASAP	Fundraising/ Outreach	List Compilation (invitations/solicitations/host committee/etc.)	Committee, Database Manager
6 Months Out	Logistics	Decide Theme	Committee
6 Months Out	Logistics	Secure Venue	Logistics Committee
6 Months Out	Fundraising/ Outreach	Confirm Honorees	Outreach Committee
5 Months Out	Publicity	Save the Date Card designed/produced/distributed	Graphic Designer
5 Months Out	Fundraising/ Outreach	Host Committee Members Targeted/Contacted/Confirmed	Outreach Committee
5 Months Out	Publicity	Initial Invitation Design for Review	Graphic Designer
5 Months Out	Logistics	Confirm Caterer and Entertainment	Logistics Committee
5 Months Out	Fundraising	Solicit Potential Auction, Wine & other In-kind Donors	Fundraising Committee
5 Months Out	Fundraising/ Outreach	Mailing List cleaned for merging with request letters	Database Manager
5 Months Out	Fundraising	Initial Mailing of Sponsors/Ad Purchasers Request Letter	Admin. Asst. w/Fundraising Comm.
5 Months Out	Fundraising	Follow-up calls begin to request letters	Fundraising Committee
4 Months Out	Logistics	Emcee decided upon and confirmed; Awards decided upon/awarded/commissioned	Logistics Committee
4 Months Out	Fundraising	Follow up Phoning re Sponsorships/Ads continues	Fundraising Committee
3 Months Out	Logistics	Photographer/Videographer secured	Logistics Committee
3 Months Out	Publicity	Finalize Invitation & Ad book Cover Design & Text	Graphic Designer
2 Months Out	Publicity	Invitation Text checked & goes to printer	Graphic Designer
2 Months Out	Fundraising/ Outreach	Mailing List "finalized" & forwarded to mail house	Database Manager
2 Months Out	Accts. Payable	Postage purchased for invitations; Payment to designer	Finance Team
2 Months Out	Publicity	Invitation to mail house	Printer
2 Months Out	Publicity	Invitations mailed	Mail house or In-house party w/ Fundraising Committee personalizing notes
2 Months Out	Fundraising	DEADLINE FOR SPONSORS TO BE LISTED ON INVITATION	
2 Months Out	Logistics	Final menu, rentals & sound confirmed	Logistics Committee
2 Months Out	Logistics	Decorations decided upon (banners, flowers, etc.)	Logistics Committee
1 Month Out	Logistics	DEADLINE FOR TRIBUTE ADS & BOOK TEXT	
1 Month Out	Logistics	DEADLINE FOR SPONSORS TO BE LISTED IN PROGRAM	
1 Month Out	Logistics	Draft of Evening Agenda	Logistics Committee
3 Weeks Out	Logistics	DEADLINE FOR AUCTION ITEMS	
2 Weeks Out	Logistics	Final script distributed to appropriate parties	Logistics Committee
2 Weeks Out	Printing	Program book goes to print	Graphic Designer
3 Days Out	Logistics	Seating (If needed)	Logistics Committee
Day of	CELEBRATION!	THE EVENT!!!	Everyone
2 Weeks After	Fundraising	Thank you letters to all contributors	Admin. Asst. w/Fundraising Comm.
Post-Event Month 1	Logistics/Planning	Wrap-Up Meeting	Everyone
Post-Event Month 6	Logistics/Planning	Planning Meeting for Next Year's Event	Everyone

in actual, agreed-upon deadlines in the date column for your event.

As you develop your team, you may add the names of the individuals responsible for taking on each task to the chart. Should you add an event coordinator to the mix, some of the tasks will be assigned to that person, allowing you and your team to focus more time and energy on your fundraising and outreach.

Creating a Budget for Your Event

It is important to try to account for all possible hard-cost expenses in the budget. To view a sample budget and goals for a recent fundraising event in the San Francisco Bay Area that was seeking a positive net dollar goal see grassrootsfundraising.org.

In producing your budget, you want to account for every conceivable expense. Then, take a moment to consider which of your regular vendors—such as your mail house, designer, or printer—may be willing to provide in-kind services as a one-time contribution to your event. You may also be able to get volunteers or talented students to provide design expertise for graphics or website updates or mailing services. These can be creative means of offsetting the fixed expenses and of meeting your net income goals.

Tools to Track Budget, Income, and Attendance

If your organization does not have the budget to purchase specially designed event software, please do not fear. Excel spreadsheets are terrific tools for your budget/goals and task timeline. They allow you to filter or sort as needed for various sets of tasks, such as calling up all the tasks for the logistics team so they know what their timeline looks like, or for the printing schedule, etc. Spreadsheets are a great way to keep track of the various components of your event, such as items for your auction, guest list, etc.

The following items are helpful column headings for a master list (that you will produce as a spreadsheet) where you can track your solicitations, commitments, attendance, and income. Tailor what's here to meet your specific needs:

Date Updated. You always want to be sure that you are updating your records

NameSource. This is very important for tracking and future solicitation purposes; if the contact is an organizational vendor or a friend of your board president, or the like, that will be noted here and you can best determine who should do follow-up, etc.

FirstName. It's critical to keep the name components (FirstName, LastName, CompanyName) as separate fields. Multiple fields will enable you to sort as needed by column and be more time-efficient in creating reports, nametags, registration lists, etc.

LastName

CompanyName

MailingAddress

City

State

PostalCode

DayPhone

EvePhone

FAX

Email

Specific Ask (i.e., Sponsor Level, Ad Size, Invitee)

Date Letter sent?

1st Call

Commit. The Commit column has the dollar amount committed by any particular donor. The columns to the right—Sponsor\$, Tkt\$, Ad\$, and Donation\$—should all add up to equal the Commit total. This is a good way to check that you have properly accounted for your donors' commitments and can honor whatever benefits are offered to them at the various levels for each category.

Sponsor\$

Tkt\$

Ad\$

AdSize

Donation\$

#Attds.

\$ In

Getting People to Attend Your Event

Now that you have set your goals, put your plan together for a great event, and identified potential participants, you need to get the people there. Although a well-put-together event is bound to attract attendees, don't overlook opportunities to ensure that the people you want to be there will be. Here are some tools I encourage my clients to use.

Save the Date Announcements. These can be a banner ad in your quarterly or monthly newsletter or you can send postcards—regular-sized full-color cards are very inexpensive to produce these days—or a letter. These all can work well in communicating with your stakeholders and in providing a tool

for your board members, staff, and others to distribute as they are out and about.

Invitations. Do you need to go to the expense of a graphic designer? Extravagant papers, inks, and die-cuts? Oversized format requiring additional postage? You must stay true to your budget. So, while your invitation does set the tone for the event, you do not need spend a lot of money to create a beautiful invite. You may ask a designer who knows your organization well to design the invitation pro bono. You can also look for in-kind donations or reduced rates for printing the invitation.

“REMEMBER THAT PEOPLE ARE BUSY AND WITHOUT (SEVERAL) REMINDER CALLS THEY MAY JUST SIMPLY FORGET.”

If you're sending more than 250 invitations and want to use bulk mail rates, I recommend sending them “first class presort” with a “live stamp.” A good mail house can spare you the work of getting the mailing done in a timely fashion, and the live stamp takes away the look of something that should be tossed into the “read it later pile” by the recipient, or worse—straight into recycling.

One of my clients recently determined that they will not go to the expense of printing and mailing invitations for their next fundraising event. They found that through regular emails and minimal phone follow-up to their key stakeholders they yielded the sponsorship commitments they were seeking. But to get the number of attendees they wanted at the event they needed to make a lot of calls and send several emails.

Think about your outgoing emails—does your email signature include details and a tagline or teaser about the event? By having each staff member add a sentence or two to their outgoing email signature, you can create a great and free way to let everyone to whom you send an email know about your event!

Follow-up. Remember that people are busy—and, though they want to support you and your organization, without (several) reminder calls they may just simply forget. Follow-up calls and donor contact also provide a key opportunity to deliver your message. Consider carefully what you or your callers will speak with your donors about and produce scripts for everyone. The event and its details are clearly important, but you now also have a contact point to let your donors learn more about what is happening with the organization—why you are having the event, who you are honoring, and how it fits into a celebration of past successes and your specific plans for the future. Messaging is key—your communications team should be prepared

to weave the event into your overall development plan through this donor contact.

You will also want to follow up with your sponsors to get the names of their guests, and if they're not using all of the tickets they were allotted for their sponsorship level, ask if they want to donate their tickets for someone else to use. Make sure you have their guests' names so you can put them on your registration list.

Other simple tools to get people to your event include sending out calendar announcements to local press outlets and online

events sites. You may find a media sponsor who will give you placement ad space in their publication. Ask to have ads placed both before and after the event—to remind people before and as a means of thanking sponsors, volunteers, and donors after.

Work the Event

An event is a perfect time to put your board and staff to work. This is an opportunity for them to get close to your other supporters. Through their conversations with guests, they will have a chance to see if people are ready to step up and join your board and/or subcommittees and whether they may be ready to make a greater commitment to the organization, such as hosting a house party to engage their own circle of influence in your work. You will need to spend time with everyone prior to the event to see that they are on point regarding the message developed for this event. The time spent in advance to prepare your team will help with success on the day of and after your event.

Events are a time-honored tradition that can bring a lot of value to your organization and meet the goals of your development plan. Although they require careful planning and the involvement of many people, they provide the kind of opportunity for engagement, participation and important face-time with the many stakeholders of your organization that is not possible with other fundraising strategies. With good food, drinks, venue, entertainment, and speakers, you can create an experience for your guests that encourages their steadfast (and increased) commitment to your organization. ■

Laurie Earp's firm, Earp Events & Fundraising, is based in Oakland, California and has been serving and working with great nonprofit organizations across the country for the last thirteen years.



CFJ youth leaders model old CFJ campaign T-shirts at their 10th anniversary celebration.

PHOTO BY JAY JAO

Not Your Cookie-Cutter Gala

Integrating Culture and Community into Special Events

By Rona Fernandez

FOR MANY OF US, A FUNDRAISING “SPECIAL EVENT” conjures up the image of a big, more-formal-than-not banquet, complete with fancy food and wine, a celebrity speaker, a high-cost ticket price, and five-figure table sponsorships that raise tons of money. However, the flip side of these events, as many fundraisers know, is that they are expensive, labor-intensive, and a little daunting to organize or even attend, particularly for groups whose members may not have connections to prospects who can make large gifts or may not be able to afford \$100-plus tickets.

But “special event” doesn’t have to mean galas or golf tournaments. Although each of those types of events can be great fundraisers as well, your group should not feel pressured to take on a cookie-cutter event if it doesn’t suit your constituents and donor base.

Many small nonprofits don’t have donors who can throw down a \$25,000 event sponsorship, but they do have several hundred people who can make small gifts and who share a certain identity that unites them. Whether you work with low-income mothers or students from inner-city schools,

the specific cultural values and traditions of your group can provide a wealth of creative ideas for out-of-the-ordinary special events that can draw a crowd, raise money, and give your supporters and donors a fun, memorable experience. When planned as part of a larger fundraising strategy, even smaller-scale special events can be opportunities to bring in new donors, raise awareness of your issue, and help strengthen your individual donor program.

The three Bay Area-based groups profiled in this article prove that special events can be as unique as your organization, and that the more connected your fundraising event is to the culture of your members and constituents, the more successful it will most likely be. Pay close attention to the cultural cues and customs of your group and what people get excited about. Brainstorm ideas with your board, staff, members, or clients about what they think would be fun and what kind of event people in your community would attend. As these groups’ events demonstrate, special events can be fresh, innovative cultural productions that transform your community’s values into a successful fundraising activity.

A Different Kind of Beauty Pageant: Gay Asian Pacific Alliance

Founded in San Francisco, the Gay Asian Pacific Alliance (GAPA) is a grassroots, all volunteer, membership group of gay and bisexual Asian and Pacific Islander men. GAPA's mission is to further the interests of queer APIs by creating awareness, developing a positive collective identity, and establishing a supportive community. Through its political component, the group does voter education and outreach on issues such as marriage equality and endorses candidates for political office. In addition, each year GAPA holds several events where members can socialize, build community, and raise money for the group. Among them is an annual banquet fundraiser featuring high-profile gay API personalities, such as George Takei (Mr. Sulu on the original "Star Trek" series and a vocal supporter of same-sex marriage who recently married his partner Brad Altman). The group also does performances and outreach at community events such as San Francisco's annual Gay Pride Parade.

But GAPA's signature event is "Runway," an annual beauty pageant/drag show that began in the 1980s to address the lack of venues, even in the culturally diverse Bay Area, for gay API men to perform. Since then, GAPA members have turned this negative situation into a community tradition. "Runway" turns the conventional, all-female "beauty queen" contest on its head by featuring only male performers who are all Asian/Pacific American. "Runway" contestants conjure up elaborate drag queen costumes, replete with feather boas, glittery jewelry, and evening gowns or debonair tuxes and sharp suits to compete for the titles of Mr. and Miss GAPA. Contestants walk across the main stage and down a runway to the cheers of audience members, many of whom wear flower leis. A panel of judges—which can include local celebrities and politicians—chooses the winners of the contest. Mr. and Miss GAPA get trophies, and Miss GAPA is crowned with a tiara.

Every year, the pageant is hosted by Tita Aida, a well-known figure in the gay API community who has a flair for putting on a good show. The campy glamour of the event is one of its hallmarks, but contestants don't leave politics out of the picture. Recently, for example, during the height of the fight for same-sex marriage in California, one "Runway" contestant wore a wedding gown and a sash that read "Marry Me," and instead of a veil wore a wedding cake on her head.

"The contestants bring unique flavor to the event," says Alex Baty, GAPA board member and chair of the group's social committee, which runs special events. "That level of camp

makes 'Runway' different from a regular beauty pageant."

The event—now in its 22nd year—has gained a reputation as a fun and popular tradition in the Bay Area's gay API community. It is also a fundraiser, raising as much as \$7,000 from as many as 300 attendees, mostly through ticket sales. The main expense is the rental of the theater venue.

Because GAPA has no paid staff, the entire event is organized by a volunteer committee of board members and other supporters. And since "Runway" has become such a tradition for GAPA members, publicity is mostly through word-of-mouth. The event also provides an automatic way for GAPA to publicize its annual banquet, another way that it contributes to the group's fundraising efforts.

A Taste of Home: Mujeres Unidas y Activas

With offices in San Francisco and Oakland, Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) is a nonprofit grassroots group of low-income immigrant Latina women. MUA's members come together for education, leadership development, and political empowerment, participating in community campaigns that address critical issues for these women: immigration, jobs, education, health care, and domestic violence. The group's members are the driving force of the organization: they recruit new members to meetings and trainings, provide peer support and counseling, and do grassroots fundraising to support the organization.

One of the MUA's special events is the *quermes*, a re-creation of town fiestas celebrating the national independence days of the women's home countries. Because most of MUA's members come from Mexico and Central American countries, they decided to organize the *quermes* not only to raise funds for the organization but also to provide a taste of home to their friends and families here.

"One of the things that people like about going to the *quermes* is that it's a family event," says Maria Jimenez, MUA program director. "It reminds people of their childhood, of things that they did back home." The events provide a family-friendly space for community members to gather, socialize and have fun, as well as contribute to MUA's fundraising efforts. MUA's members have organized mini-version of the fiestas for the past several years, with four to eight members taking the lead on planning and selling tickets to the events. The *quermes* is held in an outdoor area near the group's office; there are booths and tables where members sell traditional food and handicrafts, and areas for playing games.

A unique and culturally specific fundraising activity at the *quermes* is the *registro civil* (civil registry), a playful game that pokes fun at the institution of marriage, in which a team of “police” wander around and “trap” either actual couples or just two people who may or may not know each other, and make them “get married.” Couples are even given rings, a veil, and a jacket for their “wedding.” Humorous vows that play on frustrations and stereotypes people may have about marriage and gender roles are used in the wedding “ceremony.” For example, “being of unsound mind and body, I promise to be lazy.” The fundraising component is that people who have been tagged must pay \$5 to \$10 to get married—and the “police” sometimes strategically pick two well-known community leaders who are then asked to give more money than the usual amount. If someone resists the marriage, they are taken to a fake “jail” where they have stay for a time or pay a fine to get out and return to the party. Both the fines and the wedding fees raise money for the organization.

The *quermes* is almost completely member-run and does not incur major expenses for the organization. Several dozen MUA members get involved in planning, fundraising, and helping out on the day of the event. As many as 150 community members have turned out for the event, and MUA members have raised at least \$3,000 in profit from a single *quermes*. A bonus is that the event gives MUA members a chance to learn about raising money in a way that is culturally appropriate and connects to their lived experiences, which can help them eventually become more skillful as fundraisers.

“I think it’s effective for raising money here because it’s a way of bringing our culture from home here to the United States,” says Jimenez. “The way that people raise money in the States seems really formal to us, and this is a way of being much less formal. And for people who feel intimidated about raising money it’s a way of getting them involved in fundraising and in the process teaching them about setting goals. It’s an introduction for people who never would get involved in fundraising otherwise.”

Youth Power: Californians for Justice

In 2006, Californians for Justice (CFJ), a statewide grassroots organization working for racial justice in public schools, celebrated its tenth anniversary with four special events, one at each of its regional offices. CFJ staff knew that they wanted the events to be as youth-friendly as possible so that the group’s members—almost all high school students

of color—would feel ownership of them and have fun participating. At the time I was the development director at CFJ and oversaw planning for these events statewide. I was also aware that because most of our donors are adults, we needed to integrate our youth members’ cultural creativity and enthusiasm with a strong fundraising campaign to take full advantage of this important anniversary. In order to achieve this goal, we involved CFJ’s youth leaders actively in organizing the events from the start, so that the events could reflect their interests, spirit, and energy.

“We broke into committees with a mix of youth and adults on each committee,” says Stacy Kono, the event coordinator for the Oakland celebration. Each event’s committee consisted of between five to twenty people. “At the planning meetings, we played icebreakers, got updates about the campaign work from youth and staff, and then got down to business. It was a leadership development opportunity for both youth and adults because we were all learning how to work well together.”

Although the events had many of the same fundraising components as a regular gala, CFJ incorporated as much about its organizing work in schools as possible into these activities. For example: sponsorship levels were named after high school classes, from “Freshmen” to “Graduate”; youth fundraised by asking their friends, teachers, and families to buy program book ads and event tickets; and staff reached out to CFJ’s allies for sponsorships, including teachers’ unions, policy advocacy groups, and local elected officials we had worked with.

The program for the events also took advantage of the organization’s youthful spirit by presenting a fashion show with student leaders modeling old CFJ campaign T-shirts as a way to review the group’s ten-year history. The youth leaders were excited to “walk the runway” onstage as their friends, families, and community members cheered them on. The T-shirt parade enabled the youth and the audience to learn more about CFJ’s biggest accomplishments and campaigns.

In terms of fundraising, CFJ’s 10th anniversary campaign was successful, raising more than \$80,000 through a combination of sponsorships, program book ad revenue, ticket sales, and pitches at each of the events. The campaign also gave all the student leaders, staff, and board members involved a positive experience of fundraising that inspired them to set higher goals in the future. ■

Rona Fernandez is a fundraising consultant with Klein and Roth Consulting.



Assembly Speaker and founding Executive Director of Community Coalition Karen Bass presents an award to gala honoree State Senator Sheila Kuehl.

INSPIRING STORIES IN CHALLENGING TIMES

A Fabulous, Fun & Financially Successful Gala Dinner

By Elmer Roldan

COMMUNITY COALITION IS A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION that organizes African American and Latino residents in one of the poorest communities in South Los Angeles. When I first became involved in planning our annual gala dinner, I didn't understand why people attended these events—they were so expensive, people wore stuffy outfits, ate tasteless food, and sat through boring speeches and programs that lasted all night.

But when I learned that galas appeal to people's desire for networking, socializing, and seeing folks they don't often get together with, I realized that we had to make our event attractive and exciting enough to appeal to these desires and compete with all the other dinners in Los Angeles. Since our first gala in 2000, we've been steadily learning how to do that—and successfully raising more and more funds each year.

Many elements contribute to a gala's success. The venue has to be appropriate for the size and prestige of your event, the date cannot compete with other events that may draw from your attendance, and the food should be edible. In addition, the persons or projects you are honoring should be able to bring in friends and family. In this article, I focus on the elements that lead to successful fundraising outcomes from a gala dinner.

To raise more money than you spend producing the event,

you need a lot of planning. Our first dinner, in 2000, raised \$80,000—more than twice the \$35,000 we spent putting it on. Nine years later, our 2008 dinner generated \$400,000 on a \$100,000 investment buoyed by more than \$20,000 worth of in-kind donations.

Community Coalition used its 10th anniversary as the theme for planning its first gala dinner. Our goal was to diversify our funding by tapping into the large entertainment industry in Los Angeles. Our biggest task was to identify individuals working in corporate settings who cared about an organization like Community Coalition who would lend their name and bring their sponsorship money to the event.

Sponsorships Are Key

The money raised from an event is typically from the sponsorships you solicit months (and up to a year) ahead of the event. Acquiring new sponsorships for your dinners takes a lot of planning and time but it is the only way that your events will grow in attendance and fundraising capacity. Many donors, especially corporations, tend to start a relationship with an introductory sponsorship (usually the lowest level) and will increase that amount as the partnership with your organization grows.

Community Coalition uses two key strategies to develop relationships with new donors. With the first, we identify current supporters of our organization who have relationships to people or companies we want to invite to become sponsors. The first year we invited two of our funders from a foundation and local bank as well as some members of our board of directors to sit on a gala advisory committee. This group of folks had previous experience with galas and recommended companies they knew supported other dinners in Los Angeles.

“MANY DONORS TEND TO START A RELATIONSHIP WITH AN INTRODUCTORY SPONSORSHIP AND WILL INCREASE THAT AMOUNT AS THE PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUR ORGANIZATION GROWS.”

Your supporters can give you names and advice about how to approach these prospects. Sometimes they'll even make the first contact for you and help you get an appointment to meet with them. At the meeting, your job is to introduce them to your work and invite them to sponsor and attend your event. Their attendance is important because they will have the chance to interact with other sponsors, your staff, board members, and honorees. Your event's program and event book should include enough information about your accomplishments to impress the sponsors and their guests.

Second, we make sure to invite friends, family members and colleagues of our honoree to sponsor the gala. It is customary to ask the honoree to sponsor your event and/or give you a list of folks to invite to purchase sponsorships and ads in your event book recognizing their work. The list of potential sponsors does not need to be long. In fact, you want to avoid having to sort through a large list of people who may not be interested in supporting your event. Fifteen to thirty real prospects are more manageable and increase your chances of a sponsorship. Make sure they know that your honoree is inviting them to sponsor your gala and notify your honoree about which of their contacts is supporting your event and in what form (i.e. sponsorships or purchasing ads).

Honorees will usually give you a list of people to invite to become sponsors of the event. Some, however, will be protective of their guests and instead ask you for invitations, which they will send to friends and colleagues. It is polite to periodically ask your honoree if they have secured donors as you plan your dinner, but always respect the process proposed by your honoree.

Begin to build relationships with donors acquired through

your honorees by sending them a thank you letter, newsletter, and/or brochure with information about your organization. This can help spark their interest in your work and influence them to become a permanent donor.

The Fundraising Team

The other key element to finding and soliciting sponsors for your event is recruiting a team of people who can identify prospects and ask for their support. A healthy fundraising

plan involves your organization's staff (especially the executive director), board, and core leaders working together to ensure that your gala meets its goals. Each of these groups should set collective fundraising goals that are both ambitious and realistic. Your job as the gala coordinator is to encourage all these groups to sort their address books for a list of companies and individuals they will be inviting to be sponsors.

If, like many organizations, yours struggles to get staff, board, and members to fundraise, try bringing in an outside consultant to provide fundraising trainings and to encourage folks to take ownership of the dinner. After our second gala, we hired a consultant to train our board and staff to raise money. Yes, they groaned, complained, and threatened to leave the organization if forced to fundraise, but luckily they didn't, and the results paid off significantly.

Ninety-nine percent of our staff, managers, and board now give and fundraise for our galas each year and the increase in each year's income from the event shows their efforts. Attendance at the gala has also increased—from three hundred guests to almost six hundred.

The Honorees

Choosing the right individuals to present with an award bearing your name should be taken very seriously. Great honorees can increase your gala's prestige, attendance, fundraising, and popularity. Community Coalition gives awards in five categories to leaders in elected office, entertainment, labor, community organizing, and media. We identify individuals with progressive values who work to affect social and economic issues in the United States and abroad. Some of our past honorees include Quincy Jones,

Danny Glover, California Assembly Speaker Karen Bass, L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Dolores Huerta, and Elizabeth “Betita” Martinez.

We have secured honorees through board and staff contacts and by building on previous gala dinners. The honorees have helped Community Coalition increase the organization’s visibility, reach larger audiences from various sectors, and ultimately increase the overall amount of money raised.

We have been fortunate to be able to reach out to this caliber of honorees for our events, but we did not always have access to these individuals. At our first gala we honored a local union organizer and the founding board chair of the organization. Your group can begin by honoring individuals who are close to the group as well as well-respected local leaders and build as your event grows.

The Program

Gala dinners have a bad reputation for being bland, boring, and long. Attendees are often forced to sit through dull speeches. Try to avoid holding your guests hostage; instead, focus on being innovative. We use the program to inform and entertain our guests in a reasonable amount of time. Our galas start at 7:00 pm and end at 9:00 pm. We produce and present videos telling the honorees’ stories and accomplishments so that they do not have to speak during the program. Instead, they speak during a VIP reception, which takes place an hour before the dinner. During this reception, key sponsors, politicians, and community and labor leaders get to interact with our honorees and board in a more intimate setting.

A successful gala dinner helps to raise funds for your organization and build relationships with donors, funders, and supporters. You can demonstrate the high level of support for your work by who attends. These events require a great deal of planning and coordination—we spend six to eight months planning each year’s dinner. It is impossible for one person to do it alone, so make sure to recruit a team of energetic volunteers, hire good vendors, and trust them with the major pieces of the event. Good luck! ■

Elmer Roldan is the Fundraising Director at Community Coalition. You can reach him at elmer@cocosouthla.org.

Sources of Income for Your Event

- 1. Sponsorships:** How to price your sponsorship levels depends on your budget and fundraising goals. The first year of our gala the highest level of sponsorship was \$15,000 for a table of 10; Community Friend tables were priced at \$1,000. In 2008, our table sponsorship levels started at Dinner Chair for \$25,000 and went down to Community Friend at \$2,500. We also sell individual tickets and ads in our program book. These prices have increased over the years as our dinner has grown in size and fundraising capacity. You may need to start your community tables at \$500. Keep in mind that you need enough sponsors (especially at the higher levels) to cover the dinner expenses plus help you raise money for your organization.
- 2. Fundraising Pitch at the Event:** Many groups do a live fundraising pitch at the event to help meet their fundraising goal. Find a person with experience to conduct the pitch and make sure they feel a connection to your work. Their energy will determine how much additional money you can raise. Plan the pitch to take place after an inspirational speech or great moment of excitement. It is customary to ask your sponsors to increase their giving, and many will do this during the pitch, especially corporations that appreciate the publicity.
- 3. Silent Auctions:** Silent auctions are a great way to raise additional support for your event. We aim for thirty items that range in value to ensure all guests can participate. Items we auction include experiences such as lunch with our founder, now-California Assembly Speaker Karen Bass, and desired items like hotel stays, trips, spas, gift baskets, jewelry, and tickets to sporting events. Staff, board, and the honorary committee can give and get items for the auction. Community Coalition’s silent auction donors receive a free ad in the program book recognizing their generosity.



Integrating Online & Offline Publicity for Your Event

By Nzinga Koné-Miller

YOU'VE STARTED PLANNING your annual fundraising event and you want to do things a little differently. Perhaps you've used more traditional methods for publicizing and inviting supporters to events in the past—but with an increased focus on using the Web to communicate with constituents, you want to move beyond mailing paper invitations this year.

Let's consider one example of what a simple, integrated approach might look like.

Your supporter, Eva, receives an email on Monday announcing your annual Spring Dinner and Silent Auction. This message thanks her for her previous support and/or attendance at last year's dinner and briefly outlines what the organization has been able to achieve since then due to that support. The email also details some highlights of this year's event and asks that she look for an invitation in the mail. It includes links to a form where she can purchase her tickets online now if she's ready to do so.

Within a few days, Eva receives the paper invitation. Roughly a week later, she receives a second email. This message acknowledges both her previous support and refers to the paper invitation that was sent to her. Perhaps the email also highlights some compelling aspect of the event—live spoken word by the national poetry slam runner up, or a meal prepared by a popular local chef. The message asks—more directly this time—that she take a few minutes to purchase her tickets online or through the mail.

At this point Eva buys two tickets. She receives an automated—but personalized and heartfelt—email from one of your organization's staff thanking her.

This email also invites her to help make the event a success by telling her friends and family about it (and ideally links to an easy, online form that allows her to do just that).

You'll notice that this example is focused on your supporter's experience—that experience must remain a central focus. Any changes you make need to make it easier for constituents to support your organization and participate in your events. In our example, the use of both online and offline channels serves to get the recipient's attention, remind her to participate, and offer her two different ways to register.

The steps for moving toward a more integrated approach depend largely on where your organization is presently with regard to data integration, technological tools and resources, and what you're capable of executing. But if you'd like to move from a primarily offline approach toward a model similar to the example, here are two preliminary steps you can take.

1. Support your online program in your offline communications and at events. For any invitations or appeals sent via traditional mail, include URLs where recipients can register or donate online. On all paper forms you send to your supporters, include a field for collecting email addresses. And take full advantage of data collection opportunities at events to collect email addresses.
2. Work toward a system that allows you to cross reference your online list with your offline file. Ultimately, you want a holistic view of your supporters and their activities online and offline. You will ideally be able to segment them

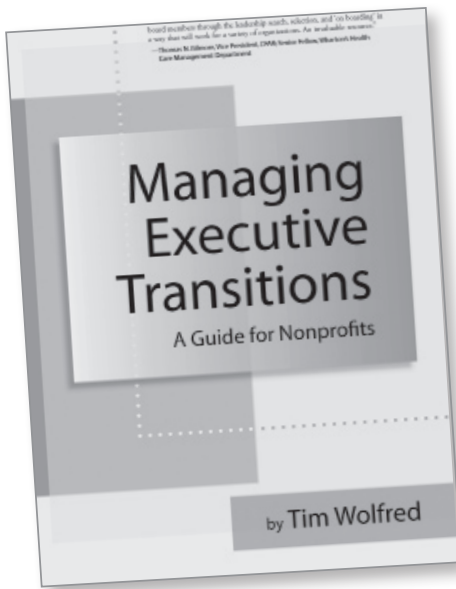
based on previous interactions—such as Eva's previous attendance at an event—or prior donations to your organization. This will also allow you to target the most appropriate people on your list for communications.

Some organizations use comprehensive Constituent—or Customer—Relationship Management software to handle this targeting, tracking, and messaging. Others use multiple tools, such as email messaging software and an offline donor database. Integrating your offline and online data—even if it's limited to importing mailing addresses into your email messaging database or entering email addresses into your donor database—allows you to target your list members more carefully.

For example, if your technology allows for geographic targeting and you know where your email list members live, you can avoid sending event announcements to constituents outside your geographic region. And when you know who your list members are online and offline, you can suppress major donors from email appeals that aren't appropriate to their level of support.

The transition from the way you've done things in the past to the way you'd like to be doing them in the future won't necessarily be a quick one. Still, taking the smaller steps now to move your organization forward will position you to make the most of an integrated approach. ■

Nzinga Koné-Miller is an account director at Watershed, a consulting and services firm designed expressly to help organizations build, grow, and sustain relationships with constituents online.



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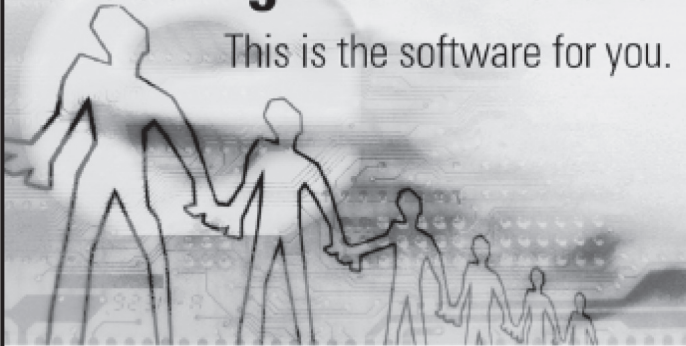
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