

HINTS FOR EFFECTIVE SPECIAL EVENTS FUNDRAISING

Special events are among the most commonly used methods of raising local funds to support nonprofit organizations, and are widely used by large and small AIDS service organizations (ASOs) and community-based organizations involved in HIV/AIDS prevention and care. Many organizations choose a single event that becomes closely associated with the organization and is held every year -- an AIDS walk, awards dinner, benefit concert, sale of food items. Others hold a different kind of event each year, or schedule several events during the year. Some events are regularly scheduled, while others are designed to meet crisis financial needs.

Special events have many purposes other than fundraising. The term "special event" refers to any special activity or occasion carried out by a nonprofit organization to raise money, increase visibility, gain new members or volunteers, inform or educate the public, demonstrate the organization's numerical strength, and/or meet other organizational needs. However, many special events are designed primarily to raise money. They can raise a very small amount of money or a very large amount. Special events like car washes, bake sales, and yard sales often raise a few hundred dollars, while "black and white balls" (formal dances to which everyone is expected to wear black and/or white clothing) or dinners may raise several hundred thousand dollars.

An effective special event usually has the following characteristics:

1. **The activity reflects or is consistent with the mission and activities of the organization.** A youth group probably would not want to choose a cocktail reception as a special event; a feminist organization might not want to hold a bake sale.
2. **The event is planned and implemented with the active involvement of board members and volunteers, not just staff.** Large events often require extensive staff time, but the involvement of volunteers -- especially in planning and marketing -- is extremely important.
3. **The event reaches and involves new people,** expanding the organization's constituency and visibility.
4. **The event is special in some way** -- creative, unusual, just right for the organization and community.

While special events have many benefits, they can also present major challenges. For example:

1. **To be successful, a special event usually requires a good deal of effort to plan and implement**, including many hours of effort by volunteers or staff.
2. **Many events do not make money** -- or make only a small amount of money. If the return on the time invested is small, the organization might better use the time to write proposals or carry out other forms of resource development that might provide a greater return.
3. **An organization may find it hard to determine what kind of special event is likely to succeed.** Trial and error is instructive, but can be costly; your organization does not want to have to try three or four types of events before finding one that works.
4. **Some special events require an up-front investment of money**; usually, the events most likely to provide a high monetary return also require a significant monetary investment. For example, an event held in a large facility -- a dinner, benefit concert, or dance, for example -- is likely to require a deposit.
5. **Special events, especially large events, often require many months of lead time for planning and marketing.** A small-scale event might be planned and implemented quickly to help meet "crisis" financial needs, but a large event takes time to plan.

If you are just getting started at special events fundraising, here are some hints that can contribute to a financially successful special event:

1. **Consider "piggybacking" your event on some activity that is already planned**, so you need plan only your activity. For example, your organization might staff a food table at a street or craft fair, or sell t-shirts at some other community event. You can piggyback on your own events; for example, if you are hosting a conference, add some kind of fundraising event in the evening.
2. **Consider a partnership event involving several organizations.** A craft fair or benefit concert that may be too much for one organization working alone may be quite manageable as a joint effort. Just be sure you agree formally on the amount of effort each group will put forth, how financial risk will be shared, and how funds raised will be allocated.
3. **Build on a tradition.** For example, sell flowers on Valentine's Day, or sell food items appropriate to a particular holiday.
4. **Establish a committee to take responsibility for the event.** Ideally, the committee should be led by board members and other volunteers, not staff. Be sure the group is large enough and has time enough to carry out the required planning and

mplementation. Be sure members include individuals with a range of skills, from planning to handling money to marketing.

5. **Brainstorm possible events and then assess them based on practical, agreed-upon criteria**, such as amount of lead time required, up-front funds required, level of effort, relevance to the organization's mission, potential return on investment of time and money, probability of financial failure, non-financial benefits, etc.
6. **Test your ideas for a special event with individuals from the target community.** Call three people from each major population group you will be targeting and get their reactions to several ideas. See how much they would be willing to contribute to the event, or how much they would pay to attend it. If the results of your informal survey are negative, look for another idea for an event.
7. **Find out what types of events have been tried in your community, by whom, and with what level of success.** Call AIDS organizations of similar size in other cities or regions to learn from their experience. Try to get someone with special events experience to serve on your committee and share his/her knowledge.
8. **Pick the right date.** Be sure no other major event that may appeal to your targeted participants is scheduled for the same day. Pick a time when people are likely to be ready for the kind of event you are planning. Consider how the weather could affect your event, and schedule at a time of year when the possibility of weather problems is small. Set a date that gives your organization enough lead time to plan a successful event.
9. **Plan the event in detail, identifying and scheduling major tasks.** Use "post it" notes or some other visual approach to list the major tasks required to carry out the event, and then place them on a calendar, working backwards from the planned date of the event. You may find you need more lead time. When you are finished, be sure someone writes down all the tasks, dates, and responsibilities.
10. **Be sure you have enough volunteers to plan and carry out the event.** Once you have identified tasks and dates, figure out how many people and how many person-hours are required for each task -- and be sure you can recruit them.
11. **Before finalizing your event, anticipate issues and challenges.** Ask the difficult questions at the planning stage, to be sure you can find the answers. Encourage someone to play "devil's advocate," questioning assumptions about sales, costs, and other factors. Consider "worst-case" scenarios. If the risk is too great for the organization to manage, find another type of event.

12. **Wherever possible, get donations of materials and services needed for the event.** Often, you can get printing of invitations donated, soft drinks provided by a beverage company, and a music group paid for by a media or beverage company.
13. **Give continuing attention to marketing.** Devise marketing plans, assign responsibilities, prepare the responsible individuals, and monitor carefully.
14. **Document and evaluate the process, so the next event will be easier to plan and implement** -- and so that your organization learns from experience.
15. **If you find an event that works well, make it your "signature event."** Hold the same kind of event each year, making it bigger, better planned, and more successful each year by building on experience.

Special events are an important source of flexible funds for many organizations, as well as a means of gaining positive visibility and attracting new volunteers and clients. They deserve serious attention as part of a comprehensive resource development plan.