



Raising Funds While Increasing Your Visibility

Successful special events do much more than simply raise money for an organization. They can be an effective way to increase your organization's visibility and bring together your members, donors, staff and volunteers to build a sense of community. Events can also help your organization recruit new members and supporters, contributing to its long-term stability. Special events can be fun, educational, and entertaining, but they also require a good deal of planning and work in order to be successful.

Is a Special Event the Right Strategy? ---

REASONS FOR HOLDING SPECIAL EVENTS

(Adapted from *The Correct Use of Special Events*, by Kim Klein, *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1 and *Getting the Most Out of Your Event*, by Dave Bassage, *River Voices*, Vol. 8, No. 4)

Although any one of the reasons listed below may be a reason to have an event, no one is reason enough.

- To increase your visibility among people who might be inclined to support you.
- To energize your Board, staff and volunteers.
- You need publicity – To reach potential supporters, you need to be in the media.
- To raise money from people or places that wouldn't give you money otherwise.
- To thank people who have worked hard for your organization.
- To announce the beginning of or celebrate the conclusion of a campaign.
- To bring credibility for your cause. You can do this by attracting respected speakers to convey support for your efforts.
- To honor one or more people who are very important to the issue you work on. You can raise money and also associate your organization with them.
- To provide an opportunity for volunteers interested in helping the organization.
- To train inexperienced volunteers in some aspects of fundraising.

Finding the Right Event for You – In choosing the particular event, consider the following:

- **Volunteer and Staff Resources** – What talents, interests and contacts do they bring to planning this particular event? How much time do they have available? Is there someone to take overall charge of it?
- **Financial Resources** – Do you have the necessary funds to front the expenses? Will this particular event help you reach your fundraising goals?
- **Organizational Image** – Does the event fit well with your organization's image and personality? Does it reflect or detract from your message? Is it the best way to achieve your goals?
- **Audience** – Will this event interest the audience you are hoping to draw? Does it fit well with their ability to pay or donate?
- **Timing** – Is there enough time to plan the event well? Will the timing compete against other events or any holidays? Does the event suit the season?

Ideas for Special Events

- ✓ **Annual Dinners** – Dinners provide a good opportunity to recognize the contributions of volunteers, community leaders, or other organizations by giving them awards. They are also readily combined with auctions or raffles.
- ✓ **House Parties** – Ask a Board member or a volunteer to host a small party or a dinner as a fundraiser. This can be especially successful if you have a Board member or a supporter who has a noteworthy home. Find 5-10 co-sponsors for the party who agree to come to the party and send invitations to 10 of their friends. Funds raised from dinner ticket sales go to the organization, while the host or hostess usually donates the food. Alternatively, ask 10 of your Board members or supporters to host smaller fundraising events, held simultaneously.
- ✓ **Silent or Live Auctions** – Many outdoor equipment manufacturers, guided trip outfitters, local shops, inns, and local artists are willing to donate their products and services as auction prizes to benefit your organization. These work best when you have a captive audience, and other distractions are limited. The amount of money raised depends on the auction items and the number of people attending the event.
- ✓ **Benefit Workshops or Classes** – If your Board or volunteers include a well-known artist, cook, photographer or writer, ask them to offer a short workshop or do a benefit reading for your organization.
- ✓ **River Festivals** – Festivals can include canoe races, riverside picnics, educational booths, entertainment and games. They can be successful fundraisers and a good way to build community around watershed issues, but can be time consuming events to plan.
- ✓ **Guided River Trips** – Guided trips provide great opportunities to educate people (e.g. invite a naturalist or a fisheries biologist to come along) and get them excited about rivers. Try to find an outfitter willing to donate a portion of or all of the proceeds. Publicize widely through word of mouth, the “Events” section of the newspaper, and to members through your newsletter. You will need liability insurance – arrange with the commercial outfitter, or check to see if your own insurance provider offers such coverage.
- ✓ **Benefit Concerts** – Concerts can be most successful when you can get the performer to donate his/her time. Beware of expenses associated with equipment rental or transportation for far-away acts. Ticket sales are very important, and will require a well-planned publicity campaign.
- ✓ **Educational Events** – Bring a renowned speaker or a well-known author to do a benefit presentation for your organization. If the speaker’s name resonates with your membership, they will pay to hear them speak.
- ✓ **“Challenge Grant” Business Partnership** – Contact local businesses whose clients might be interested in your group (e.g. outdoor outfitters and natural food stores) about donating a certain percentage of a day’s sales to you. You can set up an information booth and hold short, educational sessions throughout the day at the store. Advertise widely in order to bring your members and supporters to the store, thus benefiting the business as well.



Planning Special Events

(Adapted from *Producing Special Events* by Pat Munoz, River Fundraising Alert, Vol. 2, Nos. 3 & 4)

- ✓ **Choose an event that is appropriate and can become an annual occurrence** – The event you choose should fit with your organization’s image and help you meet the goals you have identified. It has also been said that your first special event is to make mistakes, the second to make money! Events that can be built upon year after year allow you to learn from your mistakes and build on your successes. Keep good records that you can use the following year, including a timeline, budget, hidden costs, volunteers’ and donors’ names and problems to avoid in the future.
- ✓ **Start small** – Special events can take substantial amounts of time and can be financially risky. Start off with one or two small events a year that you can handle easily, that will pay off in funds raised or members recruited, and that will not require a great deal of up-front expenses.
- ✓ **Set up an event committee** – Recruit a volunteer or Board member to serve as Chair for the event, and organize a committee of volunteers to help plan it and carry it out.
- ✓ **Prepare a budget** – Develop a budget for expenses and projected income early in the planning. Get input from others who have organized similar events to come up with a realistic projection for expenses. Include a contingency fund for hidden or unexpected expenses, especially the first time you hold the event. A good rule is to try to keep costs to less than 1/3 of the income.

To keep costs down, never assume you’ll have to pay for any aspect of the event. In-kind donations by local businesses are common –everything from auction prizes, program printing or design, advertising, food or drinks might be donated in exchange for recognition of their donations in the program. You can also find business sponsors to underwrite portions of the event (e.g. travel expenses for a speaker, or the reception before a dinner), in exchange for displaying their banner or acknowledging their donation as part of your advertising campaign. You might request sponsorships at different levels, in exchange for varying levels of recognition. Having an honorary committee is another way to help defray costs for your event. Honorary committee members are key supporters and leaders of the community that donate a set amount of money and agree to have their names included on the invitation. This helps you raise money for the event and can increase the number of tickets sold.

- ✓ **Create a detailed timeline** –List all the tasks that need to be done, and arrange them into a timeline. Assign a date and a person to each task. Remember to allow enough time for important items that need to be done well in advance, such as securing an event site/speaker, recruiting sponsors and getting auction prizes. Allow yourself enough time.
- ✓ **Charge enough for the event** – Be careful not to keep the cost of admission artificially low, in fear that you’ll lose potential participants. While you must be sensitive to the economic realities of your community, remember that you are providing participants with more than the event itself. You are also giving them the chance to contribute to a cause they care about, which in itself gives them something to feel good about. As a membership benefit, set the admission cost slightly lower for members of your organization. Be clear with participants that only a portion of their contribution is tax deductible (i.e. that portion which goes above and beyond the value of the goods or services they receive.)
- ✓ **Recruit members and volunteers** – Collect contact information from all event participants, and add them to your list of potential members to be solicited via mail soon after the event. If appropriate, make members out of those attendees that are not already, following up with them after the event with a new member welcome letter or package.
- ✓ **Evaluate** – Get feedback from all those involved in the event, and identify ways to improve it in the future. Track information on the number of attendees, total income and expenses, donors and sponsors, staff time required and names of volunteers and Board members involved. This will give you a way to compare the event from year to year, and help you improve it with time.

Additional Resources

- ◆ *Adventures in Joint Fund Raising*, by Marilyn Dickey. Chronicle of Philanthropy, March 11, 1999 issue. Discusses the trend of nonprofits collaborating their fundraising activities with other nonprofits to increase exposure and donors. Call (800) 728-2819 or visit <http://philanthropy.com>.
- ◆ *The Business of Special Events: Fundraising Strategies for Changing Times*, by Harry A. Freedman and Karen Feldman. Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 1998. Directed at both experienced and novice event planners, provides practical advice and detailed checklists.
- ◆ *Cash Now! A Manual of Twenty-nine Successful Fundraising Events*, by Aaron M. Franks and Norman E. Franks. Vancouver: Creative Fundraising, 1993, 260p. Detailed descriptions of twenty-nine different ideas for special events; includes publicity and promotion, equipment and personnel requirements and suggestions for future "spin-off" activities.
- ◆ *Choosing the Right Fundraising Strategy*, by Kim Klein and Stephanie Roth. Grassroots Fundraising Journal, Vol. 18, No. 3. Call (510) 596-8160 or visit www.chardonpress.com.
- ◆ *The Correct Use of Special Events*, by Kim Klein. Grassroots Fundraising Journal, Vol. 18, Nos. 9 & 10. Call (510) 596-8160 or visit www.chardonpress.com.
- ◆ *Creative Strategies for Successful Fundraising, Marketing, Communications, and Management*, by Alvin H. Reiss. CPR for Nonprofits: San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000. Presents case studies that offer accessible, adaptable strategies for dealing with a broad range of nonprofit concerns, and includes a chapter on special events.
- ◆ *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*, by Chardon Press. A useful publication with articles and tips on different fundraising techniques, including special events. To order call Chardon Press at (510) 596-8160, e-mail chardon@chardonpress.com or visit www.chardonpress.com.
- ◆ *How to Produce Fabulous Fundraising Events: Reap Remarkable Returns with Minimal Effort*, by Betty Stallings and Donna McMillion. Pleasanton, CA: Building Better Skills, 1999. Provides advice about choosing the right special event, selecting volunteers, planning, publicizing, and evaluating the event. Also contains a how-to guide for planning and managing a dinner event. Available through Chardon Press. Call (510) 596-8160 or visit www.chardonpress.com.
- ◆ *Organizing a Successful River Cleanup*, a booklet and video from America Outdoors. Call (423) 558-3595 or visit www.americaoutdoors.org. It is also available through the River Alliance of Wisconsin's lending library by calling (608) 257-2424.
- ◆ *Producing Special Events: Using your creativity and good sense to make the most of your fundraising events*, by Pat Munoz. River Fundraising Alert, Vol. 2, Nos. 3&4. Call (800) 423-6747 or visit www.rivernetnetwork.org.
- ◆ *Special Events (part I): Are they right for you?; Special Events (part II): Planning*. The Grassroots Fundraising Journal, Vol. 13, Nos. 2 & 3. Call (510) 596-8160 or visit www.chardonpress.com.
- ◆ *Special Events: Proven Strategies for Nonprofit Fund Raising*, by Alan L. Wendroff. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1999. Provides a strategy for conducting special events, using the Master Event Timetable (METT) as a guide.