



How to Turn It Up a Notch When Planning Your Fundraising Gala

By Julie Buckley

Hosting an annual fundraising gala can be an exceptional opportunity to grow your base of supporters, cultivate current donors and celebrate your organization's mission and success. However, too often these multiple goals – as well as an over-burdened staff and lack of resources - can distract your team from the ultimate goal: hosting an event that is truly enjoyable for the attendees. An annual event should be something that people look forward to each year. It is important to create a positive experience and one that gives them a compelling reason to return year after year. Whether you have been hosting an annual fundraising gala for years or are just about to host your first one, here are a few ideas to make things fun and interesting.

Start with the Entryway

Make your guests feel special the minute they walk through the door. Who doesn't love to walk down a long carpet? Use a large group of volunteers to greet guests with a warm welcome or make guests feel like celebrities by having 'paparazzi' hoot and holler and ask, "Who are you wearing?" This is guaranteed to make people smile before they even get to registration. If your event is themed, make sure your theme starts at the entryway. At a Woodstock themed event, volunteers dressed as hippies greeted guests by handing out single daisies; others were sitting around playing the guitar or lying outside tents in sleeping bags.

Remember the Mission.

Get your message out in as many ways as you can to remind guests of why they are there. Print your mission or "Did You Know...?" factoids on the back

of menu cards or disposable cocktail napkins. Place table tents on each table with reminders about how the money raised that night is being spent. Make your logo visible to guests even after the event ends by providing a photo-op such as a photo booth, party portraits or green screen that will provide guests with a take home memento. And don't forget to place donation slips and pens on guests tables for any 'spontaneous' donors.

Change It Up

Do you feel like your event has become stale or is ready for a change? Look for a new venue. Change the flow or format of the event such as from a seated dinner to a cocktail reception. Have some interactive entertainment during cocktails or after dinner such as a photo-op or carnival games. If it's a late night affair, add a 'midnight snack' or coffee and treats to go.

Remember the Small Details

Make sure registration tables are clear of cell phones and clutter and there are no personal belongings peeking out from under the tables. Hide ugly garbage cans or cover them; some rental companies have fabric covers available or you can use plastic table cover rolls. Put fun amenity baskets in the restrooms. People notice the small touches.

Take Your Guests on a Journey

If your event is reception style and takes place in several rooms of a venue, make each room look different. It could be something as simple as a complete color change or utilize a theme such as different seasons, movies or countries. This will create intrigue and make your guests want to explore. If

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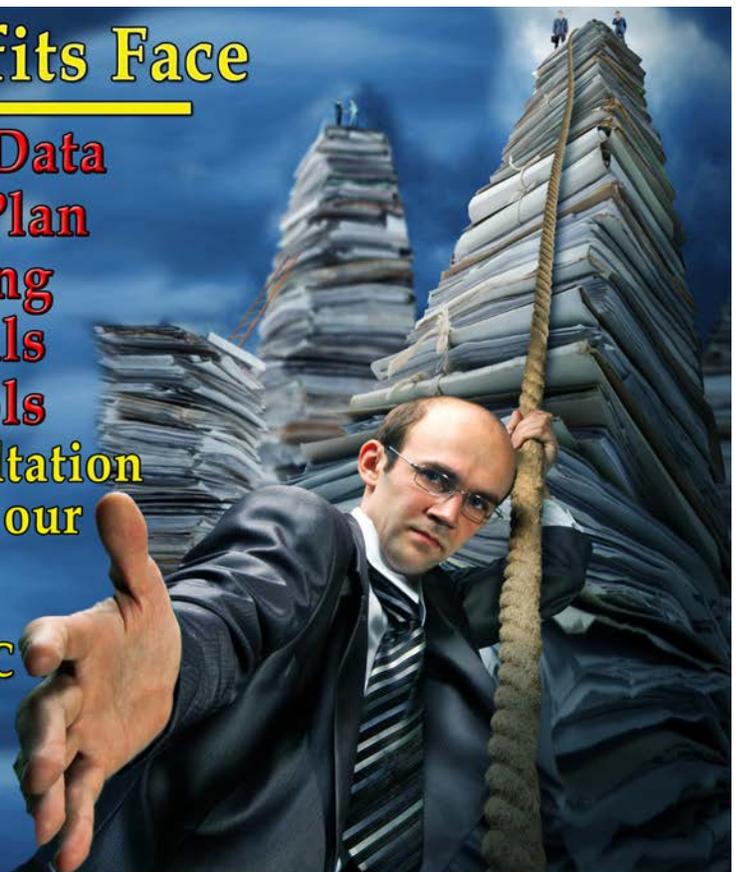
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you are working with two different spaces for cocktails and dinner, do the same thing. Take your guests from Heaven to Hell, through Fire into Ice, or simply take them from a humdrum cocktail hour with nothing but a few high cocktail tables with boring linens into a room with over-the-top lighting and décor. Be memorable!

Create a 'WOW' Moment

You don't have to have a big budget to create that 'WOW' moment. Keep doors between the cocktail and dinner spaces closed until the last moment to reveal the beautiful room inside. Or choose a unique form of entertainment such as a human strolling table with hors d'oeuvres or living statues at the entrance; or perhaps a mid-event surprise such as a dance performance or flash mob. It could even be as simple as having one huge, visually stunning decor piece at the center of the room such as a giant floral arrangement or a beautifully lit tree. These are the kind of things people will remember and it will distract them from the modest catering or minimal décor that is part and parcel of budget-conscious nonprofit events.

Creating a unique and memorable event doesn't have to translate into spending lots of money or overtaxing your small team of staff.

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Try something new, build excitement and be adventurous. Remember to put the 'fun' into your gala and focus on the attendees' experience. Not only will it make the event more enjoyable for your guests but it will also make it more enjoyable to plan.

Julie Buckley is a professional event planner and owner of Magenta, a full service event and coordination service company specializing in small to mid-sized corporate events, social celebrations and nonprofit galas. jules@magentaspecialevents.com.



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