



Ensuring your event is superlative—
not superfluous

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Brilliant!



How to create an unforgettable and successful event with multimedia, community engagement and spotlighting your programs

By PAUL LAGASSE

Seven years ago, the Southeast Regional Office of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund, www.unicefusa.org) faced a challenge arising from success. Its major fundraising event, Designs for Hope, an annual fashion show gala held in downtown Atlanta, had just achieved record-high attendance and exceeded the event's five-year fund-raising goal of \$5 million. Yet, to the organizers, the event no longer felt fresh. Board members expressed concern that people would begin to think of the event—and, by extension, the organization—as just doing more of the same. Furthermore, there was a feeling that guests were leaving the event without having been imbued with a strong sense of the organization's mission. While Designs for Hope was a successful and popular event in other U.S. Fund regions, in Atlanta the event had clearly peaked.

To reinvent its approach to special events, the Southeast Regional Office took what it called an "event hiatus." Over the next three years, the office worked with event staff from the organization's New York City headquarters to design a new centerpiece event that would explicitly convey UNICEF's mission while reflecting the specific needs of the Atlanta region. The new event also would have to be attractive to children as well as to adults.

The result, which debuted in 2011, was The UNICEF Experience, an interactive showcase of UNICEF activities that included guests' being invited to lift and carry full water containers to get a sense of the loads carried by women and children in the developing world; a "wishing well" into which guests could drop tokens to pay for vil-

lage water pumps; a chalkboard on which guests could inscribe their wishes for children around the world; readings of personal stories by people whose lives have been affected by the work of UNICEF; and even a photo booth from which guests could post their photos to social media along with the name of the event. Guests also could handle supplies, such as protein biscuits, therapeutic milk and nutrition bars, which they could then purchase on the spot with the knowledge that those items would soon be on their way to children in any one of more than 190 countries and territories.

The first event was such a success that other UNICEF regions in the United States and then Canada soon launched their own versions, with activities tailored to the needs and expectations of their communities. Every year, the flagship Atlanta event grows in popularity—and in results. And every year, new innovations are introduced. Last year, an accompanying UNICEF Experience app for Android and Apple mobile devices was developed so guests could purchase lifesaving items, get information about other upcoming UNICEF events and learn about UNICEF's mission and programs. This year, the gifts were sold by scanning bar codes, similar to buying an item at a store.

"Every year is different," says Tyler Armstrong, director of special events at the U.S. Fund for UNICEF. "We're always researching the best ways to allow people to purchase gifts and to broaden the exposure of the event. It takes a village to create one of these events."

The UNICEF Experience embodies four characteristics that, in various combinations, are common to successful special events:



Guests of *The UNICEF Experience* in Dallas learn about UNICEF Inspired Gifts, such as the *School-in-a-Box Kit* that allows one teacher and 40 students to carry on classes for three months after an emergency or natural disaster.

Credit: Kristina Bowman

Think Multimedia

It is a multimedia world, and events that can take advantage of online communications channels such as YouTube, Vimeo, podcasting and social media—not to mention traditional media channels such as television,

radio and the press—have the potential to reach vastly greater numbers of people, over a longer period of time, than can fit into a banquet hall in a single evening.

“I’ve been to so many fundraising dinners that have drifted away from powerful storytelling,” says

She suggests documenting this process in order to avoid having to reconstruct it later.

Next, Rylander and her clients worked together to assess the impact of each of the 12 events. However, unlike profitability, which is based on hard numbers, impact is not in itself a quantitative measure. To compare profitability and impact, impact must be represented numerically. Rylander and her clients identified several impact criteria that applied to the events from a list of criteria in *Nonprofit Sustainability*, specifically

- alignment with core mission
- excellence of implementation
- scale or volume
- depth of change and impact
- effectiveness at filling a gap
- community-building capability
- leverage
- addressing of root causes
- contribution to academic-quality knowledge

Then the evaluators weighted the relative importance of the selected criteria by assigning each a numerical value that, when added all together, equaled 100. Rylander points out that the more criteria you select, the less statistically significant each one becomes. The authors of *Nonprofit Sustainability* recommend selecting four or five at most.

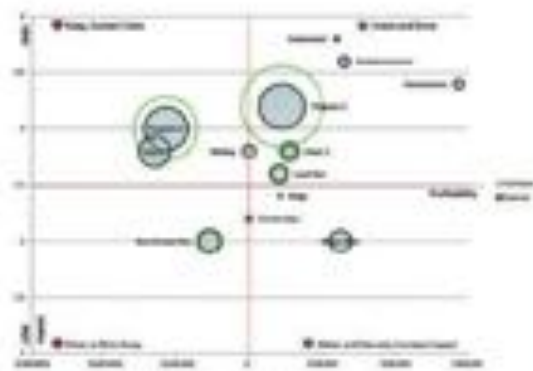
Having established and weighted the impact criteria, the evaluators then added the fundraising events to the spreadsheet and, for each event, assigned a rating of one (lowest) to four (highest) for each of the impact criteria. Rylander also added total volunteer hours per event into her matrix as a way of allowing the client to assess whether that precious resource was being allocated appropriately.

When the ranking results were transferred from a spreadsheet to the matrix grid, the results

were eye-opening. The matrix showed that two of the organization’s longest-standing events, a fun run and a food booth at a fair, were much less profitable and had a much lower impact than the board had realized. “The placement of the run on the matrix map opened up a fantastic conversation about what other, more effective strategies could be implemented to gain visibility,” Rylander says. “With the matrix map, it’s actually possible to make the case for opportunity costs, as in, ‘What if you took that money, time and energy and focused it elsewhere?’”

Ultimately, Rylander says, using matrix mapping to assess event performance is about giving nonprofit leaders the information they need to make effective decisions about going forward. “I think it’s the same as in psychology,” she says. “You can’t change what you’re not aware of. However, you can change what you are aware of.”

Once the programs and events have been ranked, the results are plotted in a matrix showing their profitability and impact.



Source: Rylander Associates

Robin R. Ganzert, Ph.D., president and CEO of the American Humane Association (AHA), headquartered in Washington, D.C. (www.americanhumane.org). "The key is to stick to the mission and to make sure that it comes through the flowers and the frills. Keep it short, sweet and simple." AHA's signature event, the Hero Dog Awards™ (www.herodogawards.com), is a model of Ganzert's dictum in action.

The Hero Dog Awards is a national competition that is designed to raise awareness of the AHA's mission of protecting animals and children from neglect and abuse by spotlighting dogs that have made a difference in their communities. The annual event, which is in its fourth year, commences in January when the public is invited to nominate dogs for one of eight categories. Following two rounds of public voting, the finalists gather at a red carpet awards ceremony in September, during which the winning dog is crowned by a panel of celebrity judges, with each finalist receiving a cash award for a designated charity. The event is recorded and broadcasted the following month on the Hallmark Channel.

Throughout the nine-month cycle, AHA's media team is also busy producing entertaining spots featuring celebrities (be sure to watch the one with the late Mickey Rooney, produced with the help of the humor website Funny or Die, www.funnyordie.com), promoting the event through interviews and articles and maintaining an active social-media campaign. (The awards' Facebook page has nearly 40,000 "likes," and its Twitter account has more than 6,500 followers.)

Another key component of the Hero Dog Awards event is underwriting. The AHA seeks sponsors for each

Actress Betty White with Cassidy, one of the Hero Dogs celebrated at the AHA's third annual Hero Dog Awards™.

Source: American Humane Association



of the categories and partners with organizations to produce videos and promotional activities. AHA will even create new categories at the request of sponsors. This year, for example, the pharmaceuticals company Zoetis sponsored a separate competition for Hero Vets and Hero Vet Techs, whose finalists will get to attend the awards ceremony in September. "Corporate stewardship is important," Ganzert says. "At a time when corporations are besieged by requests for donations, this helps them stand out in people's minds."

To that end, AHA issues accountability reports to underwriters demonstrating the visibility of their logos in the broadcast, photo opportunities with executives and other metrics.

Just as important, Ganzert adds, the event makes participants feel special. "Many of our donors have never been to a TV taping," she says. "It's not a Hollywood crowd; it's an all-American crowd, so for them, it's a real treat."

Think Community

A well-established event becomes part of the community's identity, strengthening relationships between the nonprofit and the people it serves. It enables the organization to appeal to people of all ages, offering an abundance of opportunities for people to learn more about the nonprofit and its mission.

This November, downtown Louisville will kick off its winter holiday season with the 25th annual Festival of Trees & Lights, overseen by the Children's Hospital Foundation to benefit Kosair Children's Hospital (www.kosairchildrenshospital.com/festivaloftreesandlights). The award-winning festival, held at Louisville Slugger Field, attracts an estimated 5,000 people over three days of programming aimed at children, families and adults. What started as a simple Christmas bazaar has grown into a Louisville institution that has raised millions of dollars for the hospital's vital pediatric care program.

The Hero Dog Awards is a national competition that is designed to raise awareness of the AHA's mission of protecting animals and children from neglect and abuse by spotlighting dogs that have made a difference in their communities.

An event that *successfully engages the local community* on many levels, as the Festival of Trees & Lights does, can make a lasting impression that translates into a lifetime of financial support.

The festival gets underway on a Friday night with a fireworks display near the Ohio River. The centerpiece of the festival is the walk-through display of hundreds of decorated trees, wreaths and greenery at Louisville Slugger Field, all of which can be purchased to benefit the hospital's programs. An ever-rotating roster of events includes children's activities, sweets and gifts and even raffles for a new home and car. The festival ends with a black-tie Snow Ball gala that has become a mainstay of Louisville's social calendar.

Although the Festival of Trees & Lights has been around for a quarter century, the volunteers and foundation staff who plan it year-round are anything but complacent about the festival's role in community life. For example, the festival is developing partnerships with businesses in the revitalized East Market District, nicknamed NuLu (for "new Louisville"), blocks away from the baseball field where the festival is held. By connecting with the independent businesses that are moving into the district, the festival can raise awareness of the hospital and its mission among the cadre of young professionals who work in the city's burgeoning health and medical science industries and who are drawn to its thriving independent arts and business scenes.

Consequently, the festival constantly retools its programming to appeal to the changing expectations of the younger generations. "I believe that events have to be generation-appropriate," says Leslie Buddeke Smart, CFRE, executive director of philanthropy for the Children's Hospital Foundation. "We have found that the 'next-gens' are looking for new opportunities."

To accommodate this demographic, the festival is adding an ice skating rink on the plaza of the Louisville Slugger Field facing Main Street, creating "Main Street on Ice." "Events need to be more than just fundraisers," Smart says. "They need to be fun-raisers, too."



A child's face reflects the spirit of the annual Festival of Trees & Lights in Louisville Slugger Stadium.

Source: Children's Health Foundation

An event that successfully engages the local community on many levels, as the Festival of Trees & Lights does, can make a lasting impression that translates into a lifetime of financial support. "We're all about the first impression and the last impression," Smart adds. "You want that 'aha moment' when they walk in the door, and you want the same response when they leave."

Think Specific

Successful events should explicitly remind participants about the mission of the nonprofit. While this principle may seem self-evident, finding

the best way to tie the mission into the event can be a challenge. One way to do this is to dedicate the event to supporting a specific objective. Then, when that objective has been met, the organization can gather up all the energy, support and awareness generated by the now well-established event and redirect them toward another equally deserving goal.

Breast cancer treatment is an important part of the mission of the Gundersen Health System (www.gundersenhealth.org), a nonprofit healthcare network that provides a broad range of preventive, diagnostic and treatment services to communities in Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota. Complementing the system's nationally ranked breast cancer diagnosis and treatment center, the Gundersen Medical Foundation conducts basic research and clinical research trials on medications, treatments and devices to ensure they are safe for use by patients.

In 2005, the families of two major gift donors made a \$500,000 gift to establish the Norman L. Gillette Jr. Breast Cancer Research Fellowship at the foundation, setting a funding goal of \$2 million. The timing was fortuitous, for at the time the foundation was looking into ways to organize a new fundraising walk that had been proposed by Patty Brown, a breast cancer patient

Regardless of where the funds will be used, a *successful event* cannot grow beyond the capabilities of its staff and volunteers.

and volunteer. The walk now had an explicit purpose. The question then became, could a walk-a-thon raise enough money to meet the fellowship's ambitious funding goal?

To maximize the likelihood that the event, called Steppin' Out in Pink (www.steppinoutinpink.org), would be successful, the foundation's staff took the time to research what made for successful fundraising walks. "Like any good planner, you want to go see what similar organizations are doing," explains Robyn Tanke, the foundation's chief development officer and the event's creator. The homework paid off. When the first event took place in September 2006 on the hospital grounds in La Crosse, Wis., they estimated that 500 walkers would show up. Instead, they ended up with 2,900 registrants.

The event was so successful that they dedicated a staff member, Debbie Kroner, to manage it full time. "It's not just a walk; it's an event," she says. Today, Steppin' Out in Pink has grown to include a survivor breakfast, raffles, educational and vendor booths, live music and entertainment along the route, as well as food and inflatable games. Fundraising teams and sponsors host events and programs in the months leading up to the walk. This in itself builds anticipation for the walk. "Part of the draw is that everyone is there supporting the survivors and remembering those no longer with us," Kroner explains, noting that the entire community gets into the spirit of the event by wearing pink hats and shirts—even the mechanics at the local car dealerships and garages.

As a result of the success of Steppin' Out in Pink, the fellowship exceeded its \$2 million funding goal after the 2012 walk, which had 6,700 registrants. By that time, the walk had become a La Crosse

institution. Rather than pat themselves on the back for a job well done and disbanding the event, Tanke, Kroner and the staff of the Gunderson Medical Foundation announced that after the 2012 event, money raised in future walks would be used to support other breast cancer research initiatives at the foundation, including basic science and molecular research in the hospital's oncology research lab.

Regardless of where the funds will be used, a successful event cannot grow beyond the capabilities of its staff and volunteers. "We're driven to meet the demand, and the demand has increased every year, often by more than our expectations," says Philip G. Schumacher, ACFRE, executive director of development at the Gunderson Medical Foundation. "We want to be good stewards of the dollars that come to us."



Participants in the 2013 Steppin' Out in Pink walk were invited to write a wish, an inspiration or something in memory or honor of a loved one on a rock and place it along the walk.

Source: Gunderson Medical Foundation

Think Unique

Another feature common to successful events is that people remember them and look forward to them every year. One way to make an event that memorable for supporters is to make it unique. While that may sound as though you must come up with an event that no one has ever thought of before—a daunting prospect for even the most seasoned event team—it really means that the event needs a distinctive "hook" that grabs people's attention.

Casino gaming is popular in Iowa, and it is also a big business, generating an estimated \$1 billion in annual revenue for the state. So, when a board member proposed a casino night theme for the 50th anniversary celebration of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northeast Iowa (www.lowabigs.org), the organization was surprised to discover that no one else nearby was running a similar event.

Guests get into the *spirit of the affair* by dressing up—ball gowns, feather boas and over-the-top hats typically abound.

"It's kind of a classic, more like the type of event that you would have done a long time ago," says Katie Klein, program director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northeast Iowa. "I've heard quite a few people say, 'I haven't been to one of these in years.'"

Guests get into the spirit of the affair by dressing up—ball gowns, feather boas and over-the-top hats typically abound. In the main room, volunteer "dealers" from a local university fraternity run gaming tables featuring blackjack, roulette, craps and more, using "big bucks" that guests purchase through donations. The event also features a live band and a silent auction with a wide range of prizes donated by local businesses, schools and organizations.

Originally planned as a one-time celebration, Big Casino Night proved to be so popular that Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northeast Iowa decided to turn it into an annual event alongside its other fundraisers. And the turnout at the second event, in February of this year, came close to filling the country club where it was held. "We used every square inch of the venue," says Executive Director Mike Lind. He adds that event revenue makes up approximately one-third of his organization's budget, so the success of Big Casino Night is very important.

Lind and Klein report that the event's unique theme also has provided an unanticipated programmatic benefit as well.

By offering a steak dinner followed by an evening of poker with friends, Big Casino Night has proven to be very popular with men, who are greatly needed by the organization to serve as mentors



University of Northern Iowa sports memorabilia are popular items in the silent auction at Big Casino Night.

Credit: Jim Brown Jr.

for children on its waiting list. To draw in men, the organization also has partnered with the athletics programs of the University of Northern Iowa in neighboring Cedar Falls to obtain game tickets, autographs and memorabilia for the silent auction.

"More and more we're hearing about organizations that don't want to invest in their events," Lind says. "We don't want our events to feel like they're something that people have to do. We want people to look forward to our events as something fun to do." ♥

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Resources

Block To Oblivion: A Complete Special Events Resource by Harry A. Freedman and Karen Feldman (Wiley, 2007), hardcover, 240 pages

Cause Marketing for Nonprofits: Partner for Purpose, Passion and Profits by Jocelyn Dawes (Wiley, 2008), hardcover, 332 pages

The Complete Guide to Fundraising Management, third edition, by Stanley Weinstein (Wiley, 2008), hardcover, 384 pages

Making the Most of Your Special Event by Betty B. Clardy, CFRE (AFP Ready Reference Series), paperback, 45 pages

Nonprofit Sustainability: Making Strategic Decisions for Financial Viability by Jeanne Bell, Jan Masada and Steve Zimmerman (Jossey-Bass, 2010), paperback, 208 pages

Planning Special Events by James S. Armstrong, CFRE (Jossey-Bass, 2001), paperback, 208 pages

Special Events: Proven Strategies for Nonprofit Fundraising, second edition, by Alan L. Wendroff (Wiley, 2003), hardcover, 272 pages

Breaking the Golf Addiction (PDF for purchase) <https://www.boardsource.org>

The Event 360 Blog www.event360.com/blog

AFP Resource Center Special Events Hot Topic (login required) www.afpnet.org