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Ask an Expert: How to Host Engaging Virtual Fundraising Events

By Eden Stiffman



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In this week's edition of "Ask an Expert," we asked three leaders to answer reader questions related to virtual fundraising events.

Yolanda F. Johnson is president of YFJ Consulting, a firm that specializes in fundraising events.

Diana Stanley is CEO of the Lord's Place in Palm Beach County, Fla. The homeless-services nonprofit turned its annual SleepOut fundraiser into a virtual "SleepIn" that supporters could participate in at home.

Megan Hengesbaugh is director of marketing and events at Gilda's Club Metro Detroit, an organization that supports cancer patients and their friends and families. The group turned its annual fundraising event into an online auction and multimedia experience that supporters could view for several weeks.

What are you trying to figure out in the midst of the pandemic? Send us your questions about fundraising, management challenges, and more, and we'll track down the right experts to answer them. Submit your questions to askanexpert@philanthropy.com, and we'll answer a couple each week. Let us know if you'd like to remain anonymous.

You can also catch up on recent editions of the column.

My event committee thinks people will be fatigued by virtual events come September when we planned to host our 18th annual gala. They don't want us to do a virtual event. Instead they suggest



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we just ask for support for the parks with a compelling case, create a video you can watch any time, and auction packages online during a set period of time. Do you have any comments on this scenario? Do you have any recommendations about ways to avoid virtual fatigue as the move to online fundraisers increases?

— Outreach director at a parks conservancy organization

Gilda's Club Metro Detroit hosted its first Gilda's Big Night In event at the end of April in a format similar to what your committee suggests, Hengesbaugh says. On the home page for the event, an intro video from the group's CEO led into a video about the organization's mission. Within the event website, the group pointed to auction items and raffles, and supporters could bid with a digital paddle.

"Our event ran for three weeks to allow folks the opportunity to tune in when the time was right for them," Hengesbaugh says. Her team tried to keep people connected through social media and email as well as through other creative content on the website.

Some fatigue with virtual events is bound to happen, but how you brand yours can make all the difference.

"It's all about the presentation," says Johnson. "Don't call it a gala; call a celebration," she says. Everything has to go up online at some point, but that doesn't mean everyone has to tune in at once.

"Give people the date and tell them to participate at their leisure," she says. "That may be really

appealing to your committee and for donors."

You may also want to let people know how long it will take them to participate. And try to keep it brief.

"I keep warning people: Don't have these huge virtual events that take a lot of people's time, where they have to be in front of their computer figuring out how to participate in your event," Johnson says.

Since you still have some time to develop alternatives, Stanley suggests involving your donors to create a unique online fundraising event. "Have supporters of that particular event complete an online survey," she says. Ask them for suggestions of ways to make the event different from others they've participated in.

You might also gather these suggestions through an informal focus group.

"Listen to your donors and stakeholders who know and love your organization and take their temperature first," Johnson says. "They're the ones who are going to be making the effort to go out and help you reach their people, even in the virtual realm."

Being able to network is one of the biggest draws of our events. Have you seen any virtual events that have been successful at providing that networking experience? What kinds of things are working?

— A fundraiser for an environmental advocacy organization

If your event is focused on fundraising, consider selling virtual "tables," Johnson says. Each table is its own Zoom room, or whatever platform you're using. "People get to sit at their table and talk to each other, have a conversation, and have a bit of banter like they would otherwise," she says.

Minimizing the number of people at each table will help improve the networking experience.

It doesn't really work with more than eight to 10 people because when you have something to say, you don't want to talk over people, she says. Make it fun, and keep it open for a limited period of time.

Stanley says her group hosts town-hall meetings with donors; each one highlights a specific topic important to the organization and its clients. Each hourlong virtual gathering is limited to no more than 12 people, including the CEO and another member of the executive leadership team. Participants are encouraged to use Zoom's chat feature to submit questions.

Gilda's Club hosted an "afterglow" Zoom call on the last evening of the charity's virtual event and invited staff, board members, and some of the group's closest supporters.

What would you say corporations might be looking for in terms of benefits in the virtual world, and do you think they're giving at the same levels (assuming their companies are strong, or as strong as they can be in this environment)?

— A development director at a residential nonprofit serving adults with mental illness

Just as with individual donors, people have to think about how corporations have been impacted by the crisis.

"We really are all in this together," Johnson says. "Think about the decisions they're going to have to make with their philanthropic priorities."

Based on what she's seeing with her clients, companies that had already pledged to support an event are doing everything within their power to fulfill that pledge. "They know how difficult it is for organizations," she says. "If they said they would do it, they will still try to do it."

That was the case for Gilda's Club, which already had sponsors on board for their first virtual event in April. When Hengesbaugh and her colleagues reached out to sponsors with the news of the shift to virtual, they all stuck by the group's side.

Looking ahead, she anticipates a decrease in corporate giving, though some sectors of the economy are being hit harder than others.

Johnson doesn't suggest changing the donation amounts for various sponsorship levels. Sponsors are still getting visibility on social media, email, websites, and virtual events.

But organizations should detail everything that sponsors will get. Think about branding, Johnson says. "Logos tend to become even more important now."

Be creative, like an interview with a sponsor on Zoom that you can put on your website later.

"These are things that can happen outside of the time of the event but that you can still add to a package for a sponsor at the corporate level who still wants to be seen as supporting you," says Johnson.

Hengesbaugh recommends that groups have a plan to measure their reach. "That will be great information to give them post-event," she says.

Johnson advises fundraisers to be careful about overpromising. You might tell sponsors that your event has the potential to reach a certain number of people, but don't lock yourself in because there's no way to know for sure.

Our donors are generally from an older demographic. Have you found that that audience struggles more with this virtual experience? How can we engage them in new ways when we can't gather? — A program manager for a Florida-based group of nonprofits

Organizations should make their virtual events as user-friendly as possible for donors for all ages.

"Go with platforms that are easily usable, that are usually already available on somebody's computer," Johnson says. "Make it really simple." Make the instructions in your invitation intuitive so it's very clear what donors are supposed to do. Ideally, attendees won't need to download anything to join and won't have to click through much to get to the video or event platform.

If you're hosting a live virtual event, nonprofits should make sure that they have staff on hand to help donors troubleshoot. And be sure to have an option for donors to attend by calling in on their phone if they prefer.

Stanley says her organization has spent a lot of time teaching donors how to use Zoom and other online meeting platforms. That kind of stewardship is paying off, she says. "Once someone is connected, we find that our time together is very engaging."

What advice would you add? Comment below to share your ideas. If you have a question you want us to tackle in a future column, send an email to askanexpert@philanthropy.com.

This article is part of:

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