

SPECIAL EVENT REFLECTIONS:

Ten Questions to Ask Yourself before Plunging In



This is not a period for nonprofits to conduct business as usual – and particularly for activities, like fundraising events, that are dependent on people’s financial largesse. Cause Effective is conducting a number of “pre-event evaluations” nowadays, so we thought we’d take a moment to share our methodology for helping groups figure out questions like:

- Is this event worth it?
- What modifications might help me reach my goal?
- And what is an appropriate goal? Indeed, what is the appropriate use of a special event, in general, this year?

First, we suggest that you pause and consider: What is the compelling case for why and why now to support my organization? Avoid relying solely on “because of the economic downturn” – that’s everyone’s answer. Ask yourself how you can draw more deeply upon your mission and the needs of those you serve as the basis for a compelling case for why someone should attend your event even in this year of hard choices.



However, our advice is not a blanket “fuggedaboutit” based on harsh economic realities – but rather to proceed with extra attention to setting realistic goals and to testing your revenue assumptions with some home-grown market research. So get ready, sharpen your pencil and answer, with all honesty, the set of guiding questions that follow.

1. **Have you set out clear and diverse objectives?** Events can meet multiple objectives, but be clear about which are paramount and remember – objectives can sometimes conflict – you must choose only one primary objective. Categories of objectives include: fundraising; promotion/marketing; advancing program; recruiting board members, staff, volunteers and advisors; raising morale and recognizing friends, colleagues, and supporters. Every investment of time and energy presents opportunity costs: is a special event the surest way to achieve your objectives?
2. **Have you considered what kind of activities – other than a fundraising event – might meet some of your objectives?** Consider how you might enhance programmatic events (for which you are already committing resources) in order to meet additional objectives. For example, inviting current donors to your tutoring program’s graduation ceremony at which you announce a scholarship challenge (a matching fund contributed by your most loyal donor) would give donors a taste of your program’s impact, enhance their sense of camaraderie with other donors, and fire them up with a challenge that might lead them to upgrade their gift – and you wouldn’t have to feed them fancy passed hors d’oeuvres!
3. **Have you set a clear and realistic financial goal?** If your primary objective is raising money, how much would you have to net to make it worth the investment of time, money and psychic energy it will be necessary to make the event a success?
4. **Are you relying on last year’s numbers as the basis for this year’s planning?** Consider the factors which affected your previous results and which may be sensitive to changes in this economy. Most especially – are the sources your event is dependent on financially still capable of participating at that level (see questions 5-8)?



5. **Have you tested the waters with your largest donors?** How many of the larger donors to the event in the past will give again this year? Will they give at the same level? If not, at what level will they give? We suggest you get on the phone and ask some of your most loyal supporters – those without whom the event clearly wouldn't be a success – some of these questions. Will they be insulted? Not likely. Rather, we've found that people are flattered that you cared enough about their opinion to ask.



6. **How active a “sales force” can you count on in a year when many people are scrambling to keep their business afloat?** Don't forget to poll your most likely ticket sellers as well. Are key members of your board and staff ready to get fully behind the effort? Don't underestimate the amount of time various kinds of events require and the toll they can take on program objectives and staff/board and volunteer morale.
7. **Are there past honorees, co-chairs, or other benefit committee members who will support the event again this year?** Choose a number of individuals from this group and have a conversation with them about what would influence their continued support. The answers to this question, along with several others in this list, is what should help you determine your pricing structure – not what you charged last year.
8. **What other groups of individuals or companies are most likely to be interested in supporting the event?** For instance, local businesses and your vendors. Pick 1-3 individuals within each of those groups and reach out to them – ask them if they would be interested, what kind of event would most engage them, and what level of support seems reasonable to them. This is essential information to guide decision-making moving forward.



9. **Are you drawing upon a brain trust?** Your prospective Event Committee can provide advice in shaping your event and/or other strategies. You may also be able to draw upon people or institutions who cannot themselves support your event this year, but have good ideas and might make some connections for you.

10. **Have you explored all options to lower projected expenses?** Can you get any large expense items donated this year, such as the space, food and/or liquor, printing costs, entertainment or speaking fees? Can you bring your expenses down by bargaining? Remember, the same economic hardship that's affecting you is affecting your vendors, so they may be happy to cut a deal to get the work. Alternatively, can you get the same bang for a smaller buck by scaling down? Will doing a cocktail reception vs. a sit-down dinner lower expenses without seriously impacting your ability to raise income? This is also something that you can and should “test” when reaching out to your prospective supporters.

Based on the answers to these questions, might you consider changing the primary objective of your event to cultivation? This may be a difficult decision if your organization is currently under financial stress. *But it may be possible that investing in cultivation now can do more to secure your organization's financial security in the future, and reduce the potential risks associated with a fundraising event that does not meet expectations.*



At the very least, try to pay serious attention to the cultivation opportunities presented by your event (such as seating articulate program participants at donor tables to share first-hand stories of your impact). The key is balance: what kind of events or activities will result in meeting the greatest number of objectives and achieve the greatest long-term goals of the organization?