

Four Tips to Turn Your Awareness Event into a Fundraising Event

Move from an attendance-based culture to a donation-based culture

Do your events raise awareness, but no money? Are you struggling to turn participants into fundraisers? Here are four steps to move the focus of your event from attendance and awareness to fundraising.

1. Make a well-articulated “ask.” Any effective fundraising program starts and ends with presenting others with an opportunity to help and asking for their support. Event fundraising is no different. And yet, creating an effective request is the most neglected part of any program. Begin with a few basic exercises:

- **Describe, in one sentence, what your organization does to improve the world.** This is more challenging than it sounds. We recently asked a room of 50 team members of one of our clients to write down their answer to this phrase; we received 50 different answers! But through the discussion we were able to identify key themes and language that resonated with the group.
- **Now, describe in one sentence how the event will help achieve that goal.** Be as specific as possible. “Our event helps the homeless” is not nearly as compelling as “your participation in our event will put 50 dinners on the table next week.”
- **Most importantly, get comfortable with asking “Will you help support us by participating or donating?”** This is the most important step. You must ask!

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- **Remember that in most event programs, the participants do not donate directly but rather ask others to donate to them.** Provide specific instructions to your participants to help turn them in to successful fundraisers. For example, instead of asking participants to “raise money,” ask “Will you ask ten of your friends to donate to you?” This also means that participants need to be equipped with training and tools to improve their skill in asking others for support on your behalf.

- **Create an “ask” that is specific, concise, tailored to a defined outcome and hard to refuse!** On one recent project we were able to nearly double the number of emails that participants sent to their donors simply by making sure we asked the right question.

2. Segment your participant base and tailor your efforts accordingly. Participants come in all shapes and sizes, and each person has different motives and needs. Because your participants are not the same, your communication shouldn’t be! Too often in nonprofit events every participant is treated as a cardboard cutout. Moving from awareness to fundraising involves some important efforts to speak differently to different constituencies:

- **Conduct basic analysis to understand the differences in your participant base.** This should include looking at areas such as geographic dispersion, giving history, past event attendance and link to the cause, if known.
- **Search for markers in that analysis that can be used to customize messages.** For example, on a recent engagement for a New York-based nonprofit, we suggested that the organization communicate

differently with their large Staten Island community than with their Manhattan participants. These two groups have different backgrounds and different needs.

- **Past fundraising history, if it exists, can provide valuable numerical break points for segmentation.** For example, as standard practice we communicate differently with participants who have raised nothing than we do with participants who have already begun to receive donations.
- **As you build the program, think in segments!** Noted marketing expert Philip Kotler once said, “If you are not thinking in segments, you are not thinking marketing.” Once you have identified the segments, make sure that you tailor your communication efforts accordingly. We will consider that important piece next.

3. Implement an active, customized communication plan. In many cases, the difference between events with high attendance and events with high fundraising attendance is the frequency and the quality of the communication participants receive prior to the event. Your communication plan should combine a well-articulated ask and segmented content in a powerful, cohesive effort.

- **Online.** The rise of online fundraising tools makes participant communication much easier. Online communications are of two basic types:
 - Automatic notifications that occur based upon actions taken by the participant: Registration thank-yous, donation acknowledgements, and so forth. These should be tailored to the segments identified above.
 - Notifications based upon the event timeline, such as monthly newsletters and announcements. Again, these can be further tailored to the specific segment of the participant.

As you can probably imagine, even in an event with only three or four basic segments, the number of emails can quickly become cumbersome. For example, on one of our large national projects, we handle several hundred different versions of email communication – per city. Many organizations do not have the time or resources to develop such a plan, and in that case, organizations like Event 360 can help. Whomever you choose to do the work, investing time in these systems is one of the best returns for long-term success.

- **Phone.** Targeted, personal outreach via the phone can be an effective way of building rapport with your more involved participants. The key is “targeted” – using your participant segments to identify those groups more likely to respond to the sound of your voice.
- **Champions and mentors.** Don’t neglect the impact that participants can have on each other! Harnessing participants as team leaders, fundraising coaches and training experts can be a powerful way of communicating your message.

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4. **Change from an attendance-based culture to a fundraising-based one.** Ultimately, the most powerful tool is the culture of the event itself – that is, the attitude, language, and behavior used by the staff, volunteers and participants. To make a true transition to fundraising results, the entire organization has to commit to it. There are a few important pieces to this commitment.
- **Measuring the right things.** Metrics are a powerful way of communicating within an organization. Do you set an attendance goal or a fundraising goal? Do you reward the largest team or the highest fundraising team? The way success is measured sets an important tone for the entire organization.
 - **Communicating passionately about moving from awareness to fundraising.** Participants need to understand if you are changing the make-up of an event. Be confident in this effort and make sure they understand that participation alone does not power your organization – revenue does.
 - **Being confident about how your organization and event program helps.** The foundation of successful fundraising is an authentic commitment to the cause. It is difficult to remember that you do not need to feel uncomfortable about asking for money – it is not for you; it is for the organization's efforts.

These cultural items may seem trivial. But while they are admittedly the least operational of the elements listed here, the cultural components are critically important. In several of our engagements, we've met with the leadership teams of nonprofits who admit they are reluctant or even embarrassed to ask for donations. Changing this to an environment of pride and confidence is critical to real success.

Next Steps

Using these basic tools, Event 360 has helped dozens of organizations improve existing fundraising results and add fundraising elements to their programs. The effort takes time, but the right messages, segments, communication, and culture will put you on the path for growth. To learn how Event 360 can help your organization turn your awareness event into a fundraising event, visit www.event360.com.

About the Author

Jeff Shuck is President and CEO of Event 360. Over the past seven years, Jeff has led the Event 360 team to produce more than 200 fundraising events involving hundreds of thousands of participants, which have collectively raised more than \$450 million for charity. Contact Jeff or the Event 360 Team at www.event360.com.

About Event 360

Event 360 helps nonprofits create powerful experiences that connect donors with the organization's mission. This strategy builds on more than seven years of experience in event strategy and production, fundraising consulting and technology services that help nonprofits achieve higher levels of giving, loyalty and awareness.

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