

How to Hold Great  
**FUNDRAISING  
EVENTS**  
A Step by Step Guide



by Joe Garecht

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## **About the Author**

Joe Garecht is the founder of The Fundraising Authority, the Internet's best source of fundraising articles, tips, and how-to information. Joe has been a professional fundraiser for over a decade, and during that time has served as the Director of Development of a major non-profit and of several political campaigns, as well as a fundraising consultant working with dozens of non-profits and political fundraising efforts.

For more great information on how to raise more money for your school, church, or other non-profit organization, visit Joe on the web at **TheFundraisingAuthority.com**

## **Legal Disclaimer**

Fundraising is a highly regulated industry. Before beginning your fundraising efforts, be sure to research the laws and regulations that apply to fundraising in your area. While it is our intention to offer you the best fundraising advice available, nothing in this special report should be taken as legal advice.

Events are a key portion of almost every fundraising plan. Great events can add a significant boost to your non-profit organization's bottom-line. Fundraising events are hard work, though, and can involve a significant outlay of money to secure a location, send out invitations, etc. This guide will walk you through the steps of holding great fundraising events that raise considerable sums to support your mission.

## **Why Planning is Important**

When fundraising events work, they can be a real boon to your development efforts. When they fail, however, your organization might see a significant amount of time and money go right down the drain. The best way to ensure the success of your fundraising event is to plan ahead. Every six-figure and higher fundraising event I have ever worked on has had a written, detailed event plan. Successful small events have written plans as well. Figure out the specifics of your event and write out a short event plan *before* you send out your first invitation, and you will be well on your way to holding a great event.

## **Choosing What Type of Event to Host**

Every type of event takes the same amount of preparation, planning, and hard work. It is up to each event host to decide what type of gathering would appeal to their own supporters. Choose what type of event you want to have based on your prospective attendees – the type of event would be most appealing to them? Remember, the two goals of a fundraising event are to raise money and to have fun doing so. In order to accomplish both goals, you will need to get as many people as possible excited about attending your event.

While there are an almost infinite number of event types you could host, some of the more popular categories include:

**Informal Dinners** – This type includes spaghetti dinners, buffets, beef and beers, etc.

**Formal Dinners** – You might also choose to have a more formal, sit down dinner.

**Receptions** – This is one of the most popular types of events, and includes cocktail hours, hors d'oeuvres receptions, meet and greets, etc.

**Barbeques** – including clambakes, chili cook-offs, outdoor and indoor events, etc.

**Breakfasts** – Sit down or buffet.

This is just a small sampling of the types of events you may choose to hold. Remember to keep in mind the fundraising goal for the event, the people that you are inviting, and the facilities that are available when choosing the type of event you are planning to host. Choose a method that fits your audience, your budget, and your fundraising goals.

## **Setting Up an Event Host Committee**

As you begin planning your event, you may want to recruit some close contacts or friends to serve as your host committee. You may think that you won't need to appoint a host committee, but as your event planning develops, the host committee can help share work planning and setting up the event, inviting guests, and raising money.

### **Host Committee Goals**

The first and most important role of the host committee is to sell tickets / get donations for the event. Each host committee member should be given a specific goal – a certain number of tickets that they are pledging to sell (or contacts that they are promising to bring to the event). Host committee members are usually asked to buy a ticket themselves as well as sell anywhere from 3-10 other tickets, depending on the cost of the ticket and on the committee members' sales abilities.

When recruiting a host committee, try to find members who have a large network of possible contributors to whom they would be willing to sell tickets. If you can, fill your committee with people who move in different social circles, work in different professions, and live in different geographical areas. Because selling tickets is one of the most important tasks of your host committee, you want them to be connected to as many different people and groups as possible.

### **Making Sure Your Committee Meets Its Goals**

No matter how many tickets you are asking the members of your committee to sell, it is best to set a specific goal and ask each member to meet that goal. Hosts sometimes simply ask committee members to "sell some tickets." This usually does not work well. In order to be successful, ask each host committee member to pledge to sell a set number of tickets.

As the event draws closer, stay in regular contact with your host committee to make sure the members are on track to meet their goal. Keep your committee motivated by giving them regular updates on your progress, contacting them to offer support and guidance, and gently reminding each member of their individual fundraising goal and how close they are to meeting that goal

### **Other Committee Roles**

Another possible role for your host committee is helping you organize the event. While using a host committee to sell tickets is always important for success, using them to help organize your event, while helpful, is not always necessary. The decision as to whether to ask your committee to help organize the event is completely up to you. If you do ask your host committee to help organize your event, break down the responsibilities into bite-sized chunks, such as asking one committee member to be in charge of printing invitations and another to be in charge of catering, etc.

If you choose to use your committee members to help organize the event, you must stay on top of their progress to make sure each member complete his or her appointed tasks.

## **Recruitment**

Recruiting your host committee need not be a stressful affair. Start by calling your friends and acquaintances that would qualify for the job. What makes someone qualified to be on your host committee? A large personal network and an ability to sell tickets. You want to get people on your host committee who are going to be able to easily meet the ticket-selling goal you are setting for them. Choose people who have friends that are likely to contribute to the Alliance and who can sell tickets to these contacts. Your host committee should consist of anywhere from 5-10 members.

## **Fulfillment**

In order to help get people to sign up for the host committee and allow them to feel appreciated, it is important that you create some event-related benefits for them as members of your committee. Such benefits could include being listed on the invitation and/or the program, being thanked during a speech, etc. In addition, be sure to send each member of the host committee a personal “thank-you” letter after the event is over. Personally thanking those who helped make the event a success is the first step towards getting those people to help you with future fundraising endeavors.

## **Setting the Ticket Price**

Setting the ticket price for your event is an important decision. To set the price for your event, let the type of event and the fundraising goal be your guides. Establish a ticket price based on how many tickets you think you and your host committee will be able to sell. For example:

- If your fundraising goal is \$1,500 and you sell 20 tickets, the ticket price would need to be \$75 to meet your goal. However, if you sell 50 tickets, the price would only need to be \$30.
- Similarly, if your fundraising goal is \$5,000 and you sell 25 tickets, the ticket price would need to be \$200. However, if you sell 100 tickets, the ticket price could drop to \$50.

## **Planning the Event**

There are several key considerations that need to be made when planning the actual affair:

- **Location** – Will the event be held in your home or at another location? Will you need to rent an outdoor event tent or will additional seating be needed to accommodate guests?

- **Food and Beverages** – Will the event be catered? If so, by whom and how much will it cost?
- **Parking** – Does your location have sufficient parking for event attendees?
- **Dress** – Will your event be casual, cocktail, business or formal attire?

Another key planning consideration is the program (the flow of the event). The usual structure of a fundraising event is:

1. Guests arrive and pay at the door or present tickets (more on this later).
2. Guests enjoy meal, cocktails, buffet or whatever food and beverages are being offered.
3. The host (or a person the host designates) gets the guests' attention, thanks the host committee for its hard work, and introduces the first speaker.
4. The speakers offer brief remarks to the guests and thank them for coming.
5. Guests continue to enjoy beverages and entertainment, if offered.
6. Guests depart.

This sample program is merely a guide. Because each event is different, your event structure may differ from the sample program above.

## **Event Speakers**

Early in the planning process, it is important to determine who will be speaking at your event. Speakers are more than just a program-filler. Often, choosing the right speakers will allow you to sell more tickets. People are drawn to events where they know the speaker and are eager to hear from him or her.

One of the best speakers for your event would be a staff member or client of the non-profit you are raising money for, who can let the attendees know how much their contributions help the organization. Other possible speakers for your event include civic and community leaders, well known business people, elected officials, etc. You may choose to have more than one individual speak at your event. It is best not to have more than three speakers, however, and it is important to let every speaker know that only brief remarks are required (5-15 minutes).

Of course, if your event is a very informal one, you may decide it is best not to have any official speakers, but instead to simply have the event host committee stand up to be recognized and to thank everyone for coming. The decision is yours, based on your group and the type of event you are hosting.

## **Ticket Selling Structure**

While there are any number of ways you could collect checks and set up your ticket selling system, there are really only two methods that work efficiently and effectively. It is up to you to set up a ticket selling system to be followed by your ticket sellers and host committee.

The first possible way to handle selling tickets and collecting checks is by selling actual, tangible tickets to your event. With this scenario, you will need to print up tickets well in advance and distribute them to your host committee for sale. You should also be prepared to mail out the tickets as you sell them. If you choose this route, make sure you keep a watchful eye on your ticket sellers and committee to make sure they actually sell the tickets and deliver the money to you on a timely basis. You should collect all of the money for all of the tickets they sell and have it in your hands on event day.

If you are selling actual tickets, set up a ticket collection table at the entrance to your event. At this table, a volunteer or member of the host committee collects tickets and distributes nametags. This volunteer should also be prepared to sell tickets to spouses and friends that ticket buyers have brought along.

The second method (and probably the best way to go) is by using a “guest list.” In this scenario, you use a “reply card” or “reply envelope” to collect checks. When you mail out an invitation, you include a reply envelope that allows the person to write on it the number of people attending and place a check inside. Your host committee can hand out these reply envelopes to their contacts and have them either mail them back to the Alliance, or give them back to the host committee member.

When you receive the check and response form, add the attendees’ names and the number of guests to a guest list. Then, set up a table at the door and when guests arrive, they can sign in and receive a nametag as a visible sign that they have paid.

You may also decide to sell using both of these methods. No matter which of these structures you choose, be sure to keep accurate records and a keen eye on your ticket sellers.

## **Finding Attendees**

One of the most important ways to get people to contribute and attend your fundraising event is by setting up a host committee. For some events, your host committee alone will be able to sell enough tickets to meet your entire fundraising goal. There are several other methods, however, that you can use to get contributors to attend.

### **Personal Calls**

The single most effective way to get people to come to your event is with a phone call. People find it easy to say “no” to mailed invitations, but it is hard to say “no” to a friend or contact who calls on the phone and invites you to come to their event.

One of your first activities after setting up the event structure should be to sit down and list the names and contact information of everyone you know who might attend (and who could afford to attend), including family, friends, business and social contacts, etc. Then take a few hours per night, or on the weekend, and call each one individually to ask them to attend. When you call, tell them about the event and why you are excited about it, and

make the sell: ask them to pledge to come. When they say “yes” ask them to mail you a check as soon as possible. You should also mail them a reminder the next day just in case they forget to mail the check. If you don’t receive the check in a week, call them again just to make sure it is on the way.

### **Mailed Invitations**

Another worthwhile method, though less effective than phone calls, is mailing out invitations to your event. This is a great tool for getting people you don’t know quite as well to attend. Just make sure you mail out the invitations in plenty of time to get a response – it is best to send them at least 4-6 weeks before the event, and don’t be afraid to follow up a week later with a phone call. Calling the person after sending them an invitation can double the number of people who actually buy a ticket.

### **Turning Pledges into Dollars**

No matter what type of event you are holding or how well you know the people on your prospective attendee list, there are some people who will pledge to buy a ticket when you call them but will, for whatever reason, not send in a check. Here are some strategies for making sure that everyone who makes a pledge actually buys a ticket:

#### **1. Follow Up Immediately**

The most important strategy for turning pledges into dollars is to follow up immediately with every person who makes a pledge. Each potential donor who promises to buy a ticket should receive a thank you note from the host that mentions the event, the date the pledge was made and the amount of the contribution promised.

#### **2. Make it Easy**

Whenever you follow up on a pledge, make it easy for people to send you a contribution. Send them a pre-addressed envelope along with the thank-you note, and along with any other follow-ups you make. You can also consider sending postage-paid envelopes to those who make pledges thus making it even easier for them to respond.

#### **3. Follow Up Again**

Many hosts are wary of sending out reminders or making follow up calls to potential donors for fear of offending them. Don’t be. Remember, people who make pledges to buy tickets have invested in you and your event. More often than not, the reason pledged contributions don’t come in is because donors simply forget. Use common sense, but don’t be afraid to remind contributors one, two, three times or more about pledges they made



#### **4. Make it Personal**

The single most effective pledge collection tactic in your arsenal is a personal call from the host. When letters and reminders don't work, the host should make a call to the donor thanking them for their pledge and letting them know why their contribution is urgently needed by the Alliance. Whether used as a last resort or as a simple follow up, a personal call from the host is your number one tactic for turning pledges into dollars.

#### **5. Accepting Credit Cards**

Check with the organization to see if they can accept credit cards for the event. Accepting credit cards is a great way to increase fulfillment on pledges and boost event revenue.

#### **For Those Who Can't Attend...**

If someone tells you they can't attend your event, don't be afraid to ask for a contribution anyway. Soliciting contributions from those who can't attend, but would be willing to help, can go a long way toward meeting your fundraising goal.

#### **Follow Up**

Once your event is complete, don't forget to thank those who helped to make it a success – remember, you may be calling on them to help you again some day soon. Mail personal thank you letters to all members of your host committee. Send, at least, a personally signed form thank you card to everyone who purchased a ticket to the event.

## **Fundraising Event Checklist**

### **More than Six Weeks Before Event**

- Choose event type and begin planning event structure
- Decide on event food and beverages, entertainment, etc.
- Choose event speaker(s)
- Appoint a host committee
- Print up invitations and programs
- Print up tickets and deliver to host committee
- Set up catering, entertainment, parking, tents, chairs, etc.

### **Four to Six Weeks Before Event**

- Mail invitations
- Contact host committee to check progress
- Make personal calls to solicit attendees

### **Two to Three Weeks Before Event**

- Contact host committee to check progress
- Make personal calls to solicit attendees
- Make follow up calls for invitations
- Decide on decorations for event space, if any
- Solicit volunteers to work ticket/name tag table

### **One Week Before Event**

- Contact host committee to check progress
- Last minute ticket sales

### **Day Before Event**

- Call caterer and other vendors to confirm
- Meet with host committee to collect checks or call to check on sales

### **Day of Event**

- Collect all checks
- Set up ticket / name tag table
- Decorate space (if necessary)
- Hold event

### **Week After Event**

- Pay final vendor bills
- Mail thank you cards