

Fundraising Events in the Covid Era: Here's What to Consider

As we look to the fall, here are some lessons to apply when planning events in unpredictable times.

By Yolanda F. Johnson
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Covid-19 upended the spring fundraising season, and by now most nonprofits have made the tough calls to cancel, postpone, or transform their events into virtual gatherings.

The question everyone wants answered now: When can we safely attend events again?

As we look to the fall with cautious hope, I am pondering what we have learned this spring that can help us plan for the fall. How can we make decisions that provide the best outcome for our organizations, vendors, and supporters?

Here are some things to consider and tips for handling events if the upheaval caused by the pandemic continues.

It's OK to cancel and not reschedule. James Lenox House Association, which serves older adults who are more vulnerable to the virus, has a strong annual events program. According to director of development Lane Richards Peace, senior leaders decided to cancel events and not host any virtual events.

"We know that a large section of our donor base comes from industries that are particularly hard-hit right now, and we want to be sensitive to that regarding our approach," said Richards Peace.

Plus, the group's leaders believe donors want to hear how the residents are faring, to be reassured that they are safe. "Those messages will compel giving right now — not events — so we're waiting and will reassess," she said.

When you go virtual, keep your donors in mind. Girls Inc. of New York City has many overseas donors whose input about the virus gave them an early warning so they decided to move to a virtual gala early on. If you decide to hold a virtual gala, think hard about its length, says Girls Inc. director of philanthropy Andrea Brown. She vowed that hers, which takes place this week, would last no more than 45 minutes and feature concise and compelling visual elements.

If you decide to go virtual, a number of companies can help. For example, Give Lively, a free digital-event platform, has helped many nonprofits take events online due to Covid-19, often on expedited timelines. Brooke Currence, vice president for marketing, advises nonprofits holding virtual gatherings to make an emotional connection with audiences, and Tiffany McGuire, head of partnerships, says you can do that by letting your mission shine through during the event and in your post-event follow-up.

Many vendors are open to creative solutions. To get the best deal for your organization, select the person who negotiates with vendors on your nonprofit's behalf as carefully you would select a person asking for a major gift, says Brown.

Some venues have allowed events to be rescheduled within the 2020 calendar year, and others are rescheduling throughout 2021 with agreed-upon payment arrangements.

"Organizations are suffering, and so are we," says Mike Warren, director of CPS Events at the Plaza hotel. "But we made a conscious decision to work with our clients and make a win-win situation as best we can. We'll get through this if we can find a way to work together," he said.

If you are planning an in-person event, keep donors in mind. Before the pandemic hit, philanthropist Nina Christine Yacavino had a full calendar of social events that supported charities around the world. In the days leading to lockdowns and quarantine, she says, "many organizations were still on the fence until the very last minute. And then it was a huge domino effect of cancellations." As we look to the fall and consider resuming in-person events in this unpredictable environment, try to give your supporters as much advance notice as possible when plans change.

Now that we know how dangerous the coronavirus is, we cannot take unnecessary risks. If you decide to cancel or postpone, your constituents will thank you for keeping public health and safety a priority. You do not want your event to be associated with spreading Covid-19; that could have far-reaching consequences for your event well into the future.

"When rescheduling again, I know it can be easy to think, just push through. But sometimes that is just not a good idea," Yacavino advises. "While we'll have to see when I feel comfortable attending in-person events again, I'm dedicated to continuing my support, even if from afar." She added, "If I've made a commitment to a nonprofit, I will do everything I can to fulfill that pledge."

Although we can't predict how the summer and fall will unfold, as we look ahead, let's put safety first and factor in donor behavior and their comfort levels when planning. Because the virus- response is ever-evolving, I urge you to consider developing a focus group of stakeholders to help determine supporters' feelings about gathering and to share feedback on your creative solutions for adapting events and keeping them special.

Yolanda F. Johnson is President of YFJ Consulting, LLC and President of Women In Development New York.