



READING THE ROOM

Using Donor Data to Plan Successful Events

By **Rachel Muir, CFRE**



Contents

- 3** Stop planning events on autopilot
- 4** How does repeating the same event lead to diminishing returns?
- 5** Is the party over? How to evaluate your event success
- 6** Show me the money: Event expenses
- 7** The cost of guessing: Proof it's not enough to just count revenue
- 9** Event segmentation done right
- 11** Rethink who gets invited and why
- 12** Create a mission-aligned event experience
- 13** How to predict donor generosity before the event even starts
- 14** Was it worth it? How to measure impact
- 16** What engagement signals can predict future donor retention?
- 17** Using post-event insights to refine fundraising strategies year-round
- 18** Don't let the party plan your strategy

Stop planning events on autopilot



Do you have a sacred cow at your nonprofit?

Perhaps it's an event that you keep doing year after year that sucks up all your staff and board's energy. When you launched the event the goal was simple: acquiring new donors. But you haven't seen any new faces in years, and the faces you do see are donors who could make a major gift instead—without your having to absorb the event expenses.



Old habits die hard. But events are hard work, nearly always carry high costs, and there's no guarantee of return.

How does repeating the same event lead to diminishing returns?



Here are a few reasons:

- The event is poorly designed and lacks a strong event committee or an inspiring program.
- Event donors [lapse at higher rates](#) than other types of donors.
- Board and staff fail to do effective follow-up and relationship-building to convert event attendees into donors.
- Galas burn Development Directors out and lead to staff attrition.
- The event leans heavily on transactional giving—raffles and auctions whose buyers don't make a philanthropic connection to the cause. As [Joan Garry](#) says, "Buying a ticket to your event is not the same as making a direct donation."
- You're robbing Peter to pay Paul by asking high-value donors to sponsor your event instead of asking them for a major gift (that has no expenses tied to it).
- Your board could be part of the problem. Many board members find selling a ticket easier than asking an individual to donate directly. (They need to get over that.)



Is the party over? How to evaluate your event success



Never fear, dear fundraiser! Your data's here to help you evaluate whether the event's worth repeating.

As [Simon Sinek](#) says, start with your "Why". Why are you doing the event?

Every event needs a goal—whether it's building relationships, securing new donors, creating a new revenue channel, reengaging lapsed donors, or generating new major gifts and planned giving prospects.



First, take a hard look at your event's purpose and outcomes:

- Is your event a solid investment in relationship-based fundraising?
- Is it building meaningful relationships for your organization that lead to major gifts?
- Are you reaching an audience that you haven't reached before, or are you just interacting with the same people you always see?

Next, look at your event's potential trajectory:

- Do you have enough staff to do the event?
- Are you seeing more attendees?
- Higher revenue?
- Are attendees saying this event was better than last?
- What percentage of attendees do you think will come back next year?
- Will your expenses go up or down if you repeat this event?

Show me the money: Event expenses



Events have two kinds of expenses—direct and indirect.

Direct expenses are any cash that went out the door—think invitations, venue rental, food, beverage, printing, postage, vendors, music, entertainment, plus any in-kind donations you would've been forced to pay for if they were not donated, like porta-potties.

Indirect expenses are staff time spent planning, marketing, attending and following up after the event. Staff time includes salary and benefits.



The cost of guessing: Proof it's not enough to just count revenue



"But we did a great job raising awareness" is a claim some board members or nonprofit professionals may hide behind to avoid looking too closely at what the event actually raised.

Ever heard a board member excitedly brag, "Wow, we made \$100,000 on that event!"? Cue the confetti, right? Not so fast. Most nonprofits love to trumpet what the event grossed, but the real question is—have you counted the cost, including staff time? Once you do, the numbers might tell a different story.

Let's break it down. A nonprofit puts on a gala that grosses \$100,000. Sounds great! Until you factor in the:

- **Direct expenses:** \$50,000 for entertainment, venue, food, and all the glitter
- **Indirect expenses:** \$27,000 in staff time—for your Event Coordinator, Development Director, Executive Director, and Volunteer Coordinator who all clocked in serious hours making it all happen. That includes hourly wages with benefits, plus board and volunteer hours.

Total expenses come to:

\$50,000 direct costs
+ \$27,000 indirect costs
<hr/>
\$77,000 total costs

That leaves **\$23,000** in net revenue, and a cost of **\$.77 to raise every dollar**. *Oof*. That's a bigger spend than the national average, which is closer to 50 cents for every dollar raised.

The return on investment (ROI) formula is:

$$\frac{\text{Profit} - \text{Cost}}{\text{Cost}}$$

In this case:

$$\frac{(\$100,000 - \$77,000)}{\$77,000} = 29.9\% \text{ ROI}$$

Meaning they got about 30 cents back for every dollar they spent putting on the event. And that's before factoring in donor retention or long-term value.

When nearly 80% of the revenue goes right back out the door, it's time to ask: was it really worth it?

Event segmentation done right

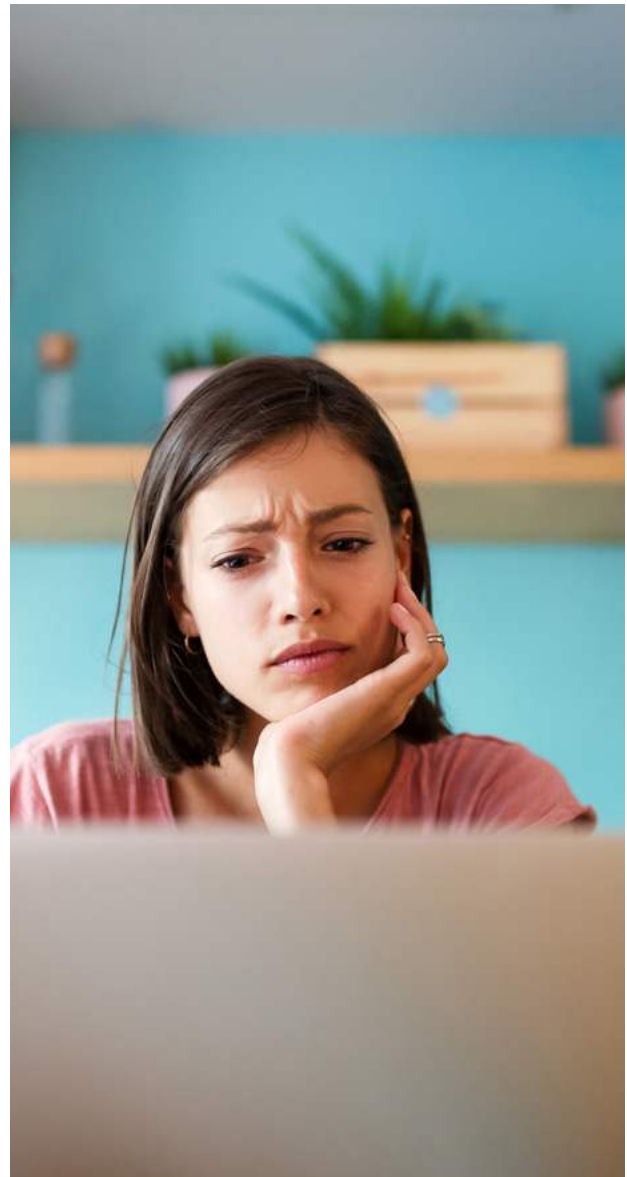


Have you ever received a generic thank you for attending a nonprofit fundraising event you didn't go to? No? Whew, glad it's just me who got that email!

Joking aside, personalization matters. If I get an email that says "thank you for coming to the gala" that I did not attend, I'll unsubscribe as quickly as possible (and in a huff at that!)

The gift of feeling known by you is the greatest gift you can give a donor. Personalized outreach doesn't just feel better—it works. Donors who receive it are almost 40% more likely to stay involved and continue supporting your mission compared to those who receive generic communications.

Properly segmenting your pre- and post-event communication (and writing it all BEFORE the event) is critical to your success.



How? Implement [segmentation](#) and AI-powered [insights](#) strategically to give event attendees and donors the gift of feeling known by you. That can look like:



Using [automation](#) to create natural follow-ups to deepen the relationship. A quick survey, a behind-the-scenes invitation, a small group conversation with leadership, or a personal video email can make your event attendees and non-attendees feel connected and valued.

Segmenting based on past interactions. A donor who attended an event last year but hasn't opened an email in months needs a "we missed you!" message—that's a very different approach than a welcome series for a first-time attendee.



Use your [CRM](#) for insights—not just gift tracking. It can surface significant patterns—like a long-time event donor who suddenly missed this year's event.

Rethink who gets invited and why



If you're just inviting the same donors year after year, you're not having a fundraiser you're having a party (most likely an expensive one at that).

The goal of your event should be getting new donors and deepening donor relationships, which is why having the same guest list year after year can limit donor growth.

Don't put all your resources into having an event without a meaningful, well-executed follow-up plan to convert first-time attendees into donors and to deepen donor relationships.



My fundraising friend [Chad Barger, ACFRE](#) and founder of Productive Fundraising, has made it easy for you with an [event attendee journey with an ask already mapped out](#). Follow his [winning formula](#), which starts with building pre-event anticipation and wraps up with day-after impact emails, all leading to the ask!

Create a mission-aligned event experience



Your event is often the only visible activity your donors see. We talk about our good work, but the event is your donor's chance to see your work and impact up close.

How will you make your mission come alive for them? Plan and invest in remarkable moments—a live testimonial with captivating, immersive, and [inspirational storytelling](#) can create a swell of emotion in your audience, perfectly timed for your ask or paddle raise.

Approach your event like a wedding planner, having everything engineered for maximum connection and emotion from start to finish. From effortless check-in, to assigning staff and board members to small numbers of donors to do great discovery, to having staff thank and mingle with auction bidders, leave no stone unturned.

Your lesson, dear fundraiser: why leave your most memorable moments to chance when you can create them?



How to predict donor generosity before the event even starts



If you're using a purpose-built giving platform, you can identify who in your database is the most ready, willing, and able to give. You can also grow your donor base by pinpointing new prospects who align with your event goals. When your donor insights and research tools work together, you can plan with precision.



Was it worth it? How to measure impact

We've talked about calculating your net revenue, cost per dollar raised, and ROI. But fundraising totals don't tell the whole story. What else should you track?

1. What was the purpose of your event, and did it fulfill its purpose?

We host events for many different purposes—recognizing supporters, engaging lapsed donors, building relationships, or simply bringing people together. Start by getting clear on your goals—and make sure your team is, too. Here's a [stellar 10,000 foot view of event evaluation](#).

2. Event attendance rate

This metric tells you how well your outreach worked. Calculate it by dividing the number of attendees by total number of invitees, then multiplying by 100. It's a simple but powerful way to see how your outreach actually landed. At a bare minimum, at least 20% of invitees should have attend.



3. Attendance growth

As your event grows, so should your guest list! Compare your year-over-year attendance growth rate, paying special attention to the percentage of new attendees.

4. Fund-a-Need donation ratio

How many guests participated in your Fund-a-Need? Calculate it by dividing the number of donors who gave during the Fund-A-Need by the total number of event attendees. This is a key metrics to improve year over year as you get refine your emotional storytelling (and event tools) to inspire generosity in the moment.

5. Survey event attendees

Here's a sample post-event attendee survey from Lynne Wester, founder of the [Donor Relations Group](#).

This EVENT strengthened my connection to [org name]:

- Strongly Agree Agree
 Strongly Disagree Disagree
 No Opinion

What aspect of this EVENT was most meaningful to you? (Fill in the blank)

What is the one thing we could do to make the EVENT better? (Fill in the blank)

Based on your experience at EVENT, how likely are you to attend future events held by us? (1 being very unlikely, and 10 being extremely likely)

- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

What engagement signals can predict future donor retention?



Tracking event attendance, conversion rate, and participant shows how well your event is building real donor relationships—the kind that lead to long-term loyalty.

Using post-event insights to refine fundraising strategies year-round

If you thoughtfully examine your data and decide you are, in fact, losing money on your event, here's a great way to transition those transaction event asks into major gift asks.

The Event-First Ask (Transactional)

"Hey Bruce. So you know I'm on the board of Sweaters for Penguins, right? We're throwing our annual Ice Ball next month, and it's going to be incredible. We're honoring the guy who played the zookeeper's cousin's best friend in that 90s nature documentary series we used to binge—remember him? He's actually super into penguin rehab now. I've got a great table of friends, and I want you to meet one of them—she might be your next business partner or your soulmate. Tickets are \$500, but it's going to be a great night for a great cause. Want me to put you down for two?"

The Mission-First Ask (Relational and Impactful)

"Hey Bruce. So you know I'm on the board of Sweaters for Penguins, right? We just had a call with some of the wildlife rescue teams we partner with down in the Southern Hemisphere. They're seeing a huge rise in oil spills and warming ocean temps, and the penguins they rescue often arrive cold, underfed, and in rough shape. I learned that right now, we can only provide enough sweaters for about 1 in 4 of the penguins they take in—and it really hit me. These little sweaters don't just keep them warm—they prevent them from illness and toxins. It's lifesaving. I increased my support this year to help save all the penguins they rescue. Can I ask you to join me in making that possible with a \$1,000 donation?"

Don't let the party plan your strategy



If events at your nonprofit have left you feeling partied to death, you're not alone. Galas, golf tournaments, and auctions can be fun—but they should never run your fundraising strategy. Use the formulas in this eBook to measure what's working, what's not, and where your efforts are actually paying off.

Because your time is too valuable to spend chasing outcomes that don't move your mission forward. You deserve to raise more money with less heavy lifting (and burn-out)! When you plan with purpose and center your goals around building real relationships, your events stop being exhausting and start being effective. And when that happens, you won't just host great events—you'll create lasting impact.

About the Author



Rachel Muir, CFRE

Rachel has worked every side of the Rubik's cube that is the nonprofit sector. When she was 26 Rachel Muir launched Girlstart, a non-profit empowering girls in math, science, engineering and technology in the living room of her apartment with \$500 and a credit card. Several years later she had raised over \$10 million and was featured on Oprah, CNN, and the Today show. Today Rachel delivers workshops and offers a monthly membership, [League of Extraordinary Fundraisers](#), transforming people into confident, successful fundraisers. Learn more about Rachel at www.rachelmuir.com.

Create a world inspired by giving




Tour Bloomerang

Donor Management
Volunteer Management
Online Fundraising
Event Management
Peer-to-Peer Fundraising
Auction Fundraising
Payment Processing
Email Marketing
Reporting & Analytics
Integration Hub



© 2025 Bloomerang® All rights reserved.

Bloomerang.com

 
@BloomerangTech

 
@Bloomerang

317.296.8100
9120 Otis Avenue
Indianapolis, IN 46216