



HOW TO PLAN

Strategic Fundraising Events That Work

By **Rachel Muir, CFRE**



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Introduction



“Hold an event, you’ll raise so much money!” said no fundraiser ever.

But other people, aka ‘the idea fairies’—very often well-meaning board members—love to suggest events to raise money for your cause. A golf tournament! A peer-to-peer event! A raffle, an auction, a friend-raiser, an awards banquet!

What could go wrong? For starters, events are the second most expensive way to raise money for your cause. They cost 50 cents for every dollar raised. (What’s the most expensive way to raise money? [Direct mail](#) to acquire new donors.)

Hold my beer. No really, it gets worse. Events demand massive amounts of staff time to plan and execute. According to [Chad Barger, ACFRE and founder of Productive Fundraising](#), [a nonprofit cannot run more than two events a year because a successful event actually requires four months to plan.](#)

What’s the consequence of burning out your staff on events? The nonprofit sector’s turnover rate is [58.3% higher](#) than for other companies. A big part of that turnover comes from the never-ending hamster wheel of event fundraising.



So, how can you do events right?

This guide walks you through the winning recipe for successful events: clear goals, a realistic budget, a winning format, a great committee, the right technology, an airtight follow-up plan to turn event attendees into donors, and a limit of no more than two events a year.

Step 1: Set clear goals for your event



Your goals are simple: Build relationships and find new individual donors. Note: purchasing an auction item is not a donation ([the IRS agrees](#)).

Raising “awareness” is not an acceptable goal. You cannot cash awareness at the bank. That t-shirt with all your sponsor logos? It’s not raising awareness. It’s summer lawn moving attire.

A better goal? That in 12 months’ time, you’re enjoying living room conversations about a major gift or legacy gift with new donors who came to your 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 gift and planned giving prospects.

If you only measure your event by net revenue and don’t set specific goals, you might find it’s not bringing in new

donors—and that for pennies on the dollar, you could have secured major gifts instead of spending half a year planning a pricey gala.

You might have donors giving \$2,000—while making major gifts of \$50,000 - \$100,000 to other nonprofits.

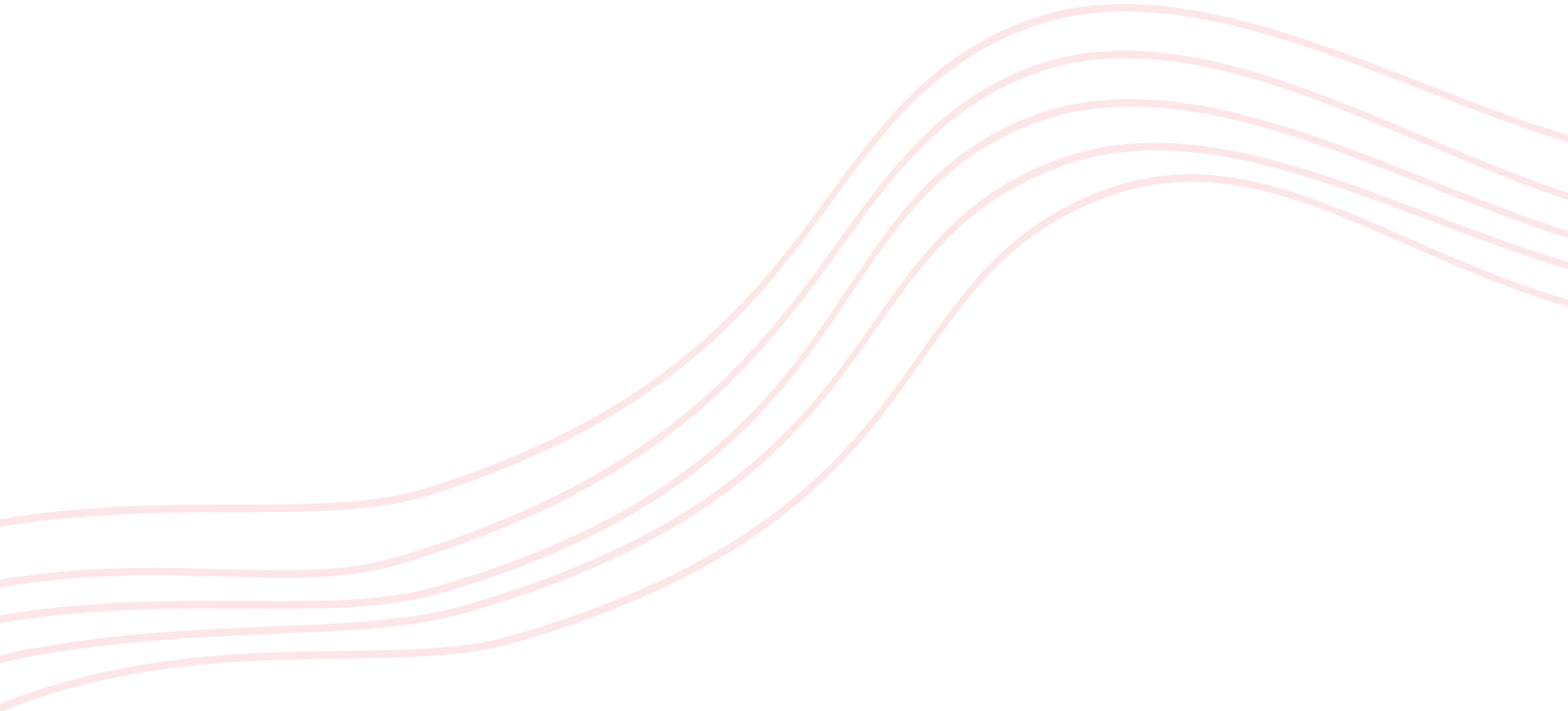
If you’re scratching your head wondering how to take stock of your current event, check out this webinar, [“Gauging the Effectiveness of Fundraising Events,”](#) with [Alice Ferris, ACFRE](#), and [Jim Anderson of GoalBusters Consulting](#).



Step 2: Determine your budget



The dirty little secret about event fundraising is that we lie about it. Very few nonprofits actually include staff costs in their event budget. And unfortunately, that's leaving the largest expense off the ledger. You have to track all the costs associated with your event—food, venue, entertainment, invitations, signage, and all the staff time—to see the [true return on your investment](#).



Step 3: Choose the right event format



Once you've set your goals and your budget, you can choose the event format that's right for you. Are you planning a gala, peer-to-peer fundraiser, auction, raffle, crowdfunding event, or something else?

The right format is critical to your success. Here's some [must-see TV](#) if you're planning an event courtesy of Kristin Steele, Founder of Swaim Strategies. Kristin does a phenomenal job of [teaching you how to structure the appeal in your event](#).

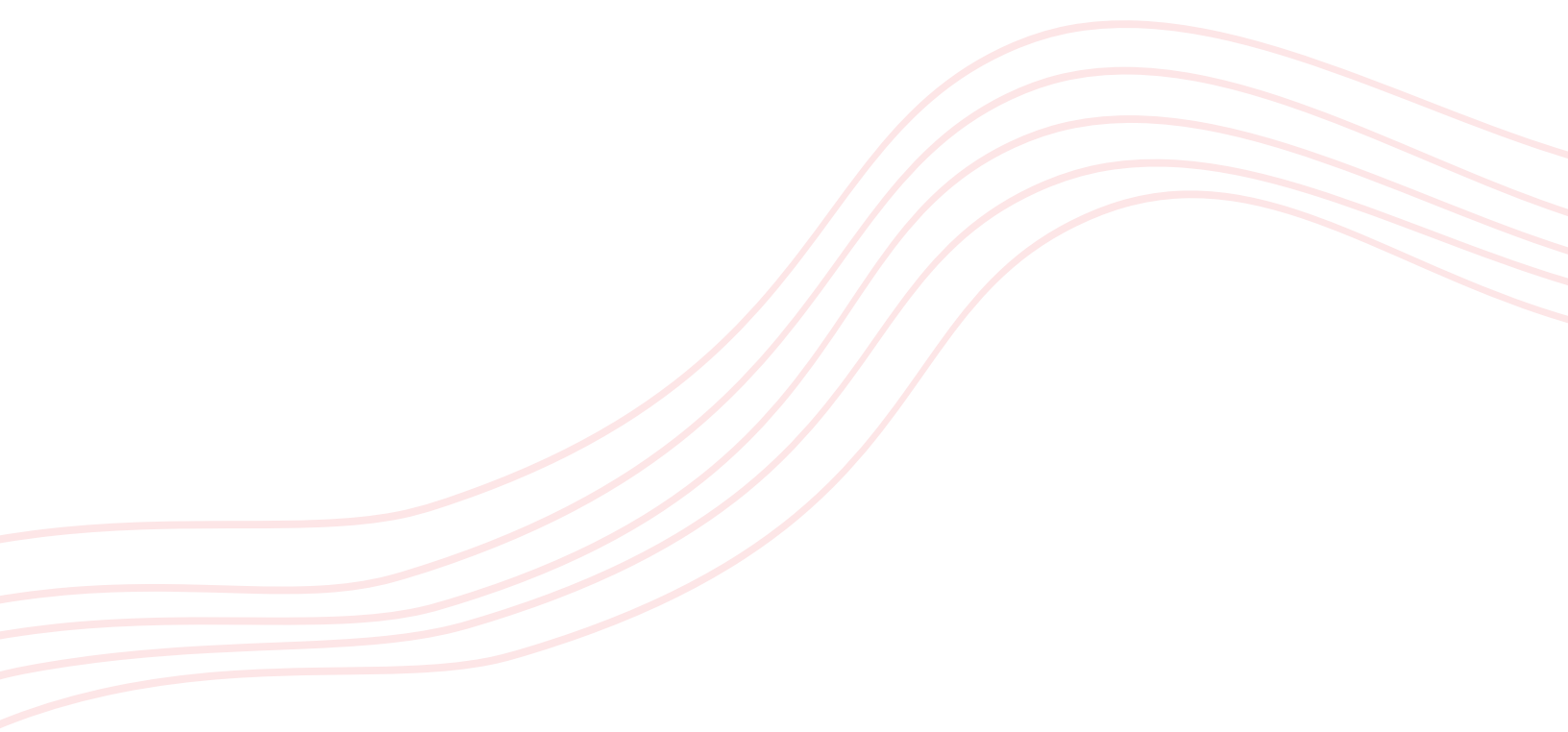
In a nutshell, the appeal is your highest potential for revenue at an event. It starts with a testimony from someone you serve. Their story is an emotional highpoint of the night. This is when you ask attendees to give as much as they possibly can. Each hand that shoots up deserves recognition, applause, high fives, and praise for getting you closer to your goal. This is a movement. You need plants. Not ferns. The other kind of plants—pre-established gifts at different solicitation levels. They build momentum and draw out other gifts.



Step 4: Recruit an effective event team



Your event committee should be made up of community influencers ready to work. A member might have overly passionate opinions on floral arrangements, but it's your job to keep them laser-focused on getting high-capacity individuals to buy tables, and be a plant to make a large gift or be part of a match.



Step 5: Get the right technology and track your data



Test all your tech ahead of time. You won't raise a penny if it's not easy to give. Set yourself up for success with seamless event registration and ticketing platforms

Bonus points for using one that integrates with your CRM (and lets you screen event attendees' generosity and wealth capacity).

No matter what kind of fundraising event you hold, you have to track your data to help you gauge its success. Remember, you measure success by more than just the amount of money that came in.

Step 6: Have an airtight follow-up plan to turn event attendees into donors



Hosting any event is about one thing—building relationships. It breaks my fundraising heart that nonprofits pour so much time and energy into events without a meaningful follow-up plan to convert event attendees into donors. Don't let that be you!

My fundraising friend [Chad Barger](#), ACFRE and founder of Productive Fundraising, has an [event attendee journey with an ask already mapped out](#) to make this easy as pie for you, from building pre-event anticipation to day-after impact emails to the ask.

I had the pleasure of attending the [Bloomerang GiveCon 2025 conference](#), where Amy Funk from F+H Partners Consulting shared a pro tip anyone planning an event must follow: [Draft all your post-event follow-up BEFORE your event](#).

A strong start to the year isn't about making massive changes—it's about taking small, strategic steps that add up. Keep your goals realistic, focus on donor retention, and make sure your team is aligned. With the right plan in place—and the right fundraising tools—you'll build momentum that lasts all year long.

Are events worth it?

They are—if you do them right!



Are nonprofit fundraising events easy and effortless? Heck no. They demand strategy, careful planning, and a dedicated team. They involve a million tiny details that most people will never see, appreciate, or understand.

But when done well, an event isn't just a night of fundraising—it's the first chapter in a donor's journey with your cause.

A great event doesn't end when the chairs are stacked and the lights go out. It creates lasting momentum, turning first-time attendees into lifelong supporters. The best events don't just raise money in the moment; they lay the groundwork for the kinds of relationships that lead to transformative gifts down the road.

Your events should be a means to an end—not the end itself. When you focus on relationships, not just revenue, your events become powerful launchpads for deeper donor engagement, stronger connections, and greater long-term impact.

About the Author



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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.

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