

LIFOCUS

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What were we thinking?

Lessons learned the hard way
by fundraising professionals

By BERNADETTE STARZEE

On a sultry afternoon in August 2003, Jeanne Ellis was managing a golf outing featuring New York Jets alumni when the power went out.

Though they didn't realize the magnitude of the blackout at first, Ellis and her colleagues quickly got to work, preparing for the evening's dinner and celebration program without air conditioning or lights.

"We had burly football players and other golfers taking showers by candlelight," said Ellis, who is the director of fundraising operations for Ronald McDonald House of Long Island in New Hyde Park.

But what could have been a disaster turned out to be one of the organization's most successful events.

"People said they had so much fun that they hoped there would be a blackout the next year," Ellis said.

This outing taught Ellis the importance of always having a plan B. "Before an event, we brainstorm about the what-ifs and develop a process for thinking on our feet if something goes wrong," she said.

For instance, the team will come up with contingencies if an honoree or auctioneer doesn't show up or if the weather is bad for an outdoor event. Experience as the great teacher is not a cliché for other local event planners who've learned valuable lessons the hard way.

And so: A primer on what and what not to do to make an event, *truly* An Event.

CHOOSE HONOREES AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS WISELY

At the start of her nonprofit career, Elizabeth Nardone was working with a committee for a disease-fighting organization.

"I was naïve — I assumed all the people at the table were there because they were committed to the cause," said Nardone, now the vice president of development for South Nassau Communities Hospital in Oceanside.

Nardone was charged with coming up with an event giveaway, and one committee member offered to help. The member presented several product ideas, but Nardone and the larger committee weren't crazy about them and decided to look elsewhere.

"It turned out the woman was part-owner of a promotion company, and she was very angry that she had put in all this time and didn't come away with a sale," Nardone said. "That taught me a valuable lesson that has served me well throughout my career. Now, I assess why people are on our committees. If I suspect their intentions aren't true, I have a conversation with them to determine if they're the right fit."

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The right honoree, too, can make or break an event. Steer clear of prima donnas, said Mary Ann Malack-Ragona, executive director and CEO of Bay Shore-based Alzheimer's Association Long Island.

"We had one honoree who gave us a hard time by forcing us to change dates several times, and we wound up going from October to December. We had a low turnout because we were right up against the holidays," she said. "You have to find an honoree who can be firm on a date and is committed to the event."

And avoid someone who is all talk and no contacts, said Kathy Munsch. The regional vice president of field operations for the Plainview-based American Heart

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Lessons: Prepare, and keep your eyes on the calendar

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Association's Long Island chapter noted it sets goals for its honorees to raise a certain dollar figure.

"We've had our share of honorees who said they would raise that amount but came up short," Munsch said. "Now we ask them how they plan to do it. If they don't have the necessary reach, they won't be successful."

BE PREPARED FOR HECKLERS

Christine Cusack is armed with comebacks when angry people use an event as a stage. Several years ago, Cusack did capital campaign fundraising for a faith-based organization.

"We would have small cocktail parties and town hall-type gatherings to present plans for capital projects, such as a new building," said Cusack, now director of development for Mercy Haven in Islip Terrace. "I found that some people would take those occasions to vent their frustrations, even if they had nothing to do with the particular campaign."

Once, during the presentation of architectural plans, one irate parishioner kept asking questions to the tune of "Did you do this? Did you do that?"

"He was really dominating," Cusack said. "I finally said, 'You have some great ideas. Our committee could use your input. Maybe we could get you to join.'"

That was the end of the man's diatribe. "It's important to have a plan for diffusing situations without offending anyone," Cusack said.

GET THINGS DONE IN ADVANCE

Munsch's experiences of planning mega-events, such as the 930-guest "Long Island Go Red for Women Luncheon," has taught her the importance of sticking to a time-



KATHY MUNSCH: Avoid anyone who's all mouth and no contacts.

line because mistakes inevitably choose to happen at the last minute.

Drop deadline work is unavoidable, but Munsch found a way to cut the craziness by cutting off entry to events two days in advance.

"We want to be accommodating, but we've had people buying tickets the day before and asking to sit with their friends, and we have to print name tags and change the seating arrangements," she said. "We've also had people walking into an event with their auction items and wondering why they weren't printed in the booklet."

Munsch said the AHA recruits its event chairpersons three years out. "Rather than going through an event as chair and learning how it's done, they go through it the year before as vice chair and learn how it's done," she said.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Matthew Campo previously planned alumni events for an institution of higher learning. He found the turnout at the annual homecoming to be disappointing, despite the addition of a beer tent and other crowd-pleasers.

"When we decided to make it a family event with carnival rides, attendance soared from about 1,000 to 5,000," recalled Campo, now the executive director of Ronald McDonald House.

Campo said that strategy can be applied to a wide range of audiences and organizations.

"For our annual polo event, we added activities like pony rides and face-painting, and we found that new people are coming out and bringing their kids," he said.

PICK A DATE WHEN PEOPLE HAVE NOTHING TO DO

Dori Scofield has learned from experience to avoid late June.

"Between Father's Day and graduations, you will be sure to get a bad turnout," said Scofield, founder/president of Save-A-Pet Animal Rescue and Adoption Center in Port Jefferson Station. She now avoids that busy time by staging her "Hounds on the Sounds Dog Walk" in early June and "Ruff Riders Motorcycle Rally" in July.

Besides steering clear of other problem dates like Christmas, Scofield checks event dates of other nonprofits in her category to avoid head-to-head competition.