

What Should You Expect From Events?

BY CATHELENE WILLIAMS, PH.D.



Special events are important to many nonprofit organizations because they raise funds, generate awareness of a cause and help cultivate relationships with donors and potential donors. Events tend to be more costly than other fundraising strategies in terms of return on investment, but they often are incorporated into an overall fundraising strategy because they provide visibility for the organization and opportunities to involve many different people in its activities.

The literature on special events is focused largely on anecdotal descriptions of how-to's for producing events—budgets, checklists, timelines, descriptions of types of events, formats, use of media for events, managing volunteer involvement, securing in-kind support and evaluating the event. However, what the literature lacks is benchmarking research that would help a nonprofit determine whether an event is appropriate considering its circumstances, how its event results compare with those of other like organizations and effective ways to follow up with constituents, media and potential donors after the event.

Recognizing the need for such research and education on special events, the StubHub Foundation, an advised fund of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation in Mountain View, Calif., provided a grant to the AFP Foundation for Philanthropy to collect information on event planning and management. The intent of the research was to provide data to enable nonprofit managers to compare their events with those of other organizations

by type, size, region, metropolitan area size and number and types of events per year.

The study results will provide a tool to help nonprofits make informed decisions about whether to invest in an event, how to plan a successful event or events, steps to maximize return on investment and follow-up activities to help turn event attendees into donors. The Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) also will use study results to plan formats for presenting event-planning information to its members.

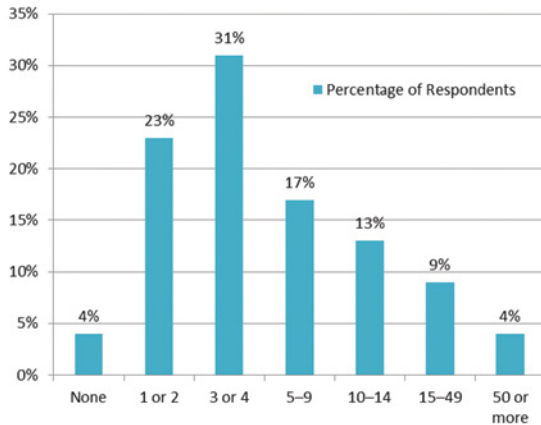
Number and Types of Events and Staffing

Nearly all respondents to the survey hold special events in a typical year. About one-third have one or two events per year, and nearly one-third have three or four events a year. (See Chart 1.)

What are the most frequently held types of events? More than half (62 percent) hold a stewardship and/or fundraising reception or dinner, followed by

- a gala with a live and/or silent auction (57 percent);
- another type of special event, such as a duck race, talent show, etc. (41 percent);
- a sport tournament (35 percent);
- a-thons (23 percent);
- meetings with organization leaders (19 percent); and
- a gala without an auction (18 percent).

Chart 1. Number of Events per Year, by Percentage of Respondents



More than half of responding organizations do not have a full-time staff position devoted to event management, but 20 percent have one events position, and 17 percent have two to four such positions. More than 40 percent have two to four other staff members who work on events as needed.

Event Revenue and Costs

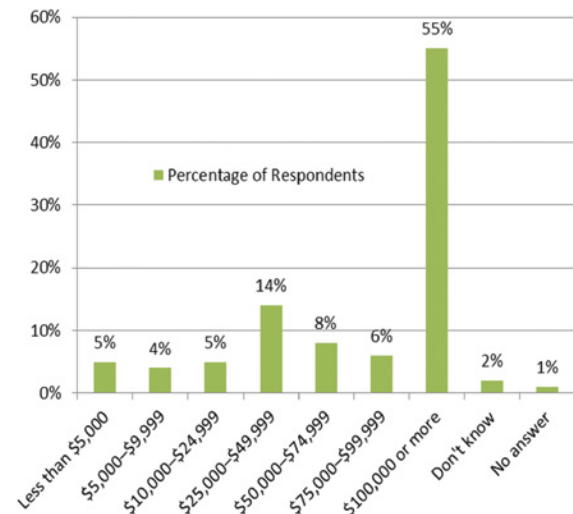
More than half of respondents reported gross revenue of \$100,000 or more per year from special events. Fourteen percent said their event(s) generated less than \$25,000 per year, while 28 percent reported gross revenue of between \$25,000 and \$99,999. (See Chart 2.)

To what extent does revenue from special events account for an organization’s overall annual revenue? About one-third (35 percent) of respondents said that special event revenue accounts for less than 5 percent of their organization’s annual revenue, followed by

- 5–9 percent (15 percent of respondents)
- 10–19 percent (15 percent of respondents)
- 20–29 percent (8 percent of respondents)
- 30–49 percent (9 percent of respondents)
- 50 percent or more (12 percent of respondents)
- Don’t know/no answer (6 percent)

Slightly more than half of respondents track cost per dollar raised. Chart 3 shows estimated typical costs per dollar raised for several types of events. Note that a majority of respondents either did not respond or said they did not know the answer to the question.

Chart 2. Approximate Growth in Revenue per Year From Special Events, by Percentage of Respondents



Event Decision Making

Asked about factors that influence the decision to hold an event, respondents gave a variety of answers, from relevance to the mission to “The board made me do it.” Most indicated they consider expected return on investment and staff and volunteer capacity to support the event among the most important factors.

How much do you charge for an event? The most important factors to consider when making that decision include the amount charged for similar events in the past; the cost of the venue, meal and “ambiance”; the amount charged by other organizations in the area for similar events; and the sponsors’ funding level. (See Chart 4.)

Information Sources for Event Planning

The top three information resources fundraisers turn to for event planning are volunteers and staff from the organization, professional colleagues who plan events and websites of other event-holding organizations, according to survey respondents. More than half said they would like to have more benchmarking data, as well as information on effective ways to achieve event objectives, fresh ideas for themes, new technologies to aid in events and third-party events (events hosted by someone outside the organization to benefit the organization). Online and face-to-face are the preferred formats for receiving event

Chart 3. Cost per Dollar Raised, by Event Type

Cost per \$1 raised	Percentage of Respondents							
	Gala	Auction	Sport tournament	A-thon	Reception, dinner	Music or lecture series	Meeting with organization leaders	Conference/think tank
Less than \$0.20	13%	15%	13%	14%	16%	7%	9%	5%
\$0.20-\$0.39	18%	3%	9%	5%	10%	4%	2%	2%
\$0.40-\$0.59	15%	7%	6%	3%	4%	0%	0%	2%
\$0.60-\$0.79	4%	1%	4%	2%	3%	1%	0%	1%
\$0.80-\$0.99	3%	2%	1%	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%
More than \$1	1%	2%	2%	0%	2%	1%	0%	0%
Don't know	21%	20%	21%	22%	22%	31%	30%	33%
NO ANSWER	26%	50%	45%	53%	42%	56%	59%	57%

planning and management information, while printed materials are the least preferred.

Involving Volunteers in Events

A majority of responding organizations depend on volunteers to help with special event planning, execution, evaluation and follow-up. More than 80 percent involve volunteers in planning events and in

soliciting donated items for the event. More than 70 percent use volunteers to assist with on-site logistics and ticket sales. Nearly 60 percent ask volunteers to solicit corporate sponsors and assist in evaluating the event, and almost half use volunteer help with event follow-up (thank-you letters, calls to attendees, media contacts, etc.). Only 24 percent ask volunteers to contact media sources to advertise the event.

Who Was Surveyed?

In March 2014, the AFP Foundation for Philanthropy conducted its first special events research project. Via the AFP *eWire* newsletter, the AFP foundation invited individuals who have event-planning experience to participate in focus groups to help determine the questions to be asked in an online survey. Two focus groups were conducted by conference call in February 2014, each attended by five to seven event specialists. An online survey instrument was developed based on feedback from the focus groups.

The sampling frame for the online survey, which was fielded in March 2014, was a random sample of 2,500 AFP members in the United States and 1,200 AFP members in Canada. A to-

tal of 101 individuals responded to the survey. An analysis of the demographic characteristics of both groups of respondents indicates that they are representative of the AFP members in the United States and Canada in terms of organization type and organizational operating budget.

The AFP Foundation for Philanthropy wishes to thank those who made this research possible. First and foremost, we are grateful to the Stub-Hub Foundation, an advised fund of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, for providing funding for the research. We also appreciate the assistance provided by AFP members who participated in the focus groups and those who responded to the online survey.

Chart 4. Importance of Decision Factors for Setting Event Charges

	Percentage of Respondents				
	Not at all important	Somewhat unimportant	Somewhat important	Very important	NO ANSWER
Amount charged for similar events in the past	1%	3%	42%	50%	5%
Cost of venue, meal and “ambiance”	2%	5%	40%	50%	4%
Amount charged by other organizations in our area for similar events	5%	11%	55%	24%	5%
Sponsors’ funding level	7%	12%	41%	36%	5%
Brand recognition of our organization	8%	18%	34%	35%	6%
Perks we are able to provide for participants	14%	26%	40%	14%	7%
Other	14%	2%	2%	9%	73%

Many respondents cited the importance of selecting volunteers according to their interests and abilities, training volunteers and staff, communicating well throughout the event-planning process and providing volunteer recognition.

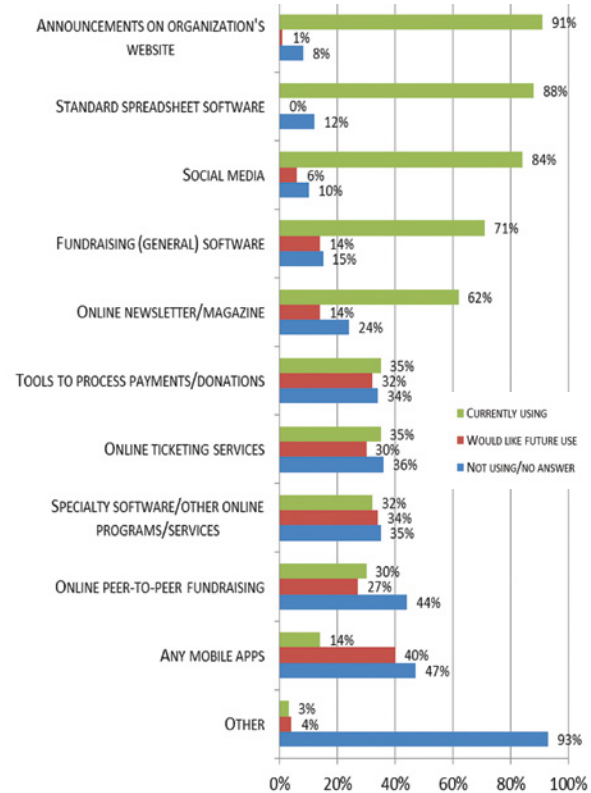
Event Technology

Announcements on the organization’s website, standard spreadsheet software (e.g., Excel or Access) and social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) are currently used by more than 80 percent of responding organizations for event planning, execution and evaluation, and 6 percent of respondents are interested in using social media for this purpose. Seventy-one percent use general fundraising software for event planning, and an additional 14 percent would like to in the future. Sixty-two percent use online newsletters or magazines, while 14 percent would like to use these vehicles in the future. Sixty-two percent use online newsletters or magazines, while 14 percent would like to use these vehicles in the future.

Percentages of organizations using other technologies (tools to process payments/donations, online ticketing services, specialty software/other online programs and services) are more evenly divided between those organizations currently using the technology and those that want to use the technology in the future. Only 14 percent of respondents reported current use of mobile apps, while 40 percent would like to use mobile apps in the future. (See Chart 5.)

Decision factors for selecting a particular technology include ease of use, cost, capacity for use by multiple users, portability, customizability, automatic generation

Chart 5. Current and Desired Use of Technology for Events, by Percentage of Respondents



of receipts and thank-you letters, being Web-based (as opposed to purchased software) and integration with other software programs used by the organization.

Issues with technology were among the problems cited most often with events:

- Lack of integration among technologies, e.g., accounting software, donor-tracking software, registration software, etc., are incompatible
- Clumsy third-party websites for sign-up, resulting in missed registrations and, consequently, unexpected guests the day of the event
- Spotty or slow Wi-Fi for onsite registration
- Hardware (computers and/or A/V) failure
- Fundraising database not event-friendly
- Lack of participant registration via online tools (because they do not know how to use the system, etc.)
- Lack of access to/unaffordability of technology that could make the job easier


Event Evaluation and Follow-Up

Respondents reported that the most important measure of the success of an event is whether or not it met the budget goal. Bringing in new donors, prospects and volunteers was the second-most-cited success measure. (See Chart 6.)

In response to an open-ended question on steps taken to follow up with attendees after an event, nearly all survey participants indicated they thank attendees, donors and sponsors in a variety of ways, including letters, cards, emails and personal calls. Many also survey top donors, sponsors and ticket holders to get feedback on the event. Several reported they provide coverage on the event (and recognition of donors and sponsors) in print or online via magazine or newsletter articles, social media and press releases. Several said they add all donors and attendees to their mailing and email lists and/or donor databases after the event.

Additional follow-up steps mentioned by respondents were sending attendees copies of event photographs, event programs (to sponsors who were unable to attend), tax receipts for gifts, token gifts and/or invitations to a stewardship event or tour and sending new donor packets with a mailed thank-you note to first-time donors.

About one-fourth of respondents said they poorly measure or do not measure the results of event follow-up. Several indicated they use donor software or standard spreadsheet software to track event results and use the data for decision making. Others use checklists to track whether or not they met event goals.

Note: The AFP 2014 *Special Events Report* includes crosstab analyses of event types, event revenue and volunteer involvement by different variables, including the number of events per year, approximate gross revenue from events, organization type, organization budget, geographic area, metropolitan area size, number of full-time equivalent (FTE) fundraising positions and number of FTE events positions. The full report is available on the AFP website, www.afpnet.org/specialevents. 

Cathlene Williams, Ph.D., is a consultant specializing in curriculum development, project management and business writing. She is a former AFP staff member and is currently a consultant to AFP for ACFRE, research programs and other professional advancement projects and to the AFP foundation for grant research and support services.

Chart 6. Top Measures of Event Success, by Percentage of Respondents

