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Auction, Gala, or Ball? Creating High Impact Special Events

True or False: An easy way to make a lot of money is to host an event.

True or False: Events of any size, and by any name, take a ton of work and resources to make them high impact from an attendee's perspective as well as to the bottom line.

True or False: Special events do play an important role in the life of a Catholic school: they build community and foster engagement; they provide a connection point for those close to the school or those who know nothing about a school; and they expose a variety of constituents to a school but more importantly to its mission.

Did you answer "True" to all of the above? While it is true that events take a great deal of time and energy yet hold great value for the overall advancement programs of Catholic schools, it is unfortunately not true that events are a quick and easy way to grow resources for your school. Careful planning and execution of events is a must from start to finish. Events should wow a school's constituents, and help with the moves-management of donors through the donor life cycle (identification, cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship).

Whether a school is considering a new event or refreshing an existing one, it is always good practice to, as Stephen R. Covey mentioned in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Begin with the End in Mind."

Does Your Party Have a Purpose?

As with any new or staple event, those in a leadership role should be able to easily answer, "What is the purpose of this event?" These leaders might include individuals from a school's office of advancement, a special events coordinator, the development committee of a School Advisory Board, or even a determined principal and office staff member supported by parent volunteers. The purpose of the event should be clear internally and externally through the school's marketing, messaging, and



execution. Remember that “everything speaks,” so in planning a new or updating an existing event, begin by determining what is needed to be said clearly and concisely about the event’s purpose:

- Is it to raise money? Is it to be a great party? Is it to reconnect with alumni and parents of alumni? All of the above?
- Does the event fit with the school’s community, mission, and strategic priorities?
- Is the event open to a diverse and inclusive population, or for a select group?
- Is there receptivity (and ideally even a sense of hunger) to have an event, or is there an oversaturation of events, inclusive of small fundraisers, in the school or local community?
- Who will lead? Is there an army of one or many trying to make the event happen?

The answers to the above questions should be determined well in advance of any actual planning. It is all too often the case that schools may find that they are actually on “event overload,” yet necessity tries to justify the addition of another event without thinking thoughtfully about the event’s purpose. Once adequate thought has been given to the purpose behind having an event, the next challenge is to consider what type of event should be held. The following list is not exhaustive, yet provides a broad overview for purposes of comparison.

Common Special Events in Catholic Schools

Type	General Concept	Benefit	Drawback	Purpose	Do if you have
Auction	These events are usually large scale and have opportunities for individuals to bid on items either through a silent, live, and/or online auction.	High energy and engagement Brings people together Participants walk away with something tangible	Takes a lot of work (preparing, securing items, etc.) Unless there is dynamic volunteer leadership, preparation can overwhelm staff Requires a community with excess capital	Raise money Reconnect	Strong volunteer base Community interest Ability to attract interesting items for auction A community of donors who can support multiple asks in the course of a school year
Gala	Often a speaker or honoree is present. Sometimes a silent auction is included.	A speaker or other reason for gathering	Takes a lot of work Expectations for high-end presentation and experience	Raise money	Strong volunteer base Community appreciation of high-end events Key volunteer/staff skilled in designing events
Golf or other Sport Event	Most common is a golf tournament, often a scramble, at a golf course that people know or enjoy.	Usually a beautiful setting Golf course provides much of the setup	Sponsors needed (each hole, etc.)	Raise money	Strong volunteer base Community interest A community that likes golf
Carnival/ Picnic/ Harvest Festival	Perhaps the most common kind of event. Similar to a parish festival.	Energy and spirit building Family friendly	Takes a lot of work (preparing, securing items, etc.) Requires a logistical guru	Raise money	Strong volunteer base Community interest Ability to offer games or events of interest
Stewardship Events	These are usually opportunities to thank generous donors or significant volunteers.	Essential part of good donor relations Reinforces mission and stewardship	Takes money but isn’t about raising money	Thank donors for their generosity	Significant donors or volunteers to thank
Speaker Series	Can be annual or more frequent in the course of a school year.	Typically low on amount of overall planning needed Often uses school facilities Image-building potential	Need an impactful or interesting enough speaker to drive and engage participants, especially in diverse communities	Provide the community with experts	Access to speakers Ability to effectively market value of this kind of event

Choosing which type of event to offer likely depends most significantly on timeline, budget, volunteer base, and overall capacity to manage such an event. A school leader likely knows what would fit best in a particular community, but a best practice is to reach out to at least five of a school's most connected and interested volunteers or donors. Ask them for their perspective! Not only will they appreciate being asked for advice, but other results might include additions to your volunteer base or other resource pools.

If the school has been offering the same event for years, don't be bashful about adding in new dimensions each year to have a different look and feel. Change up the invitation with more than just a new date. Add new elements of fun, such as dancing at the end of the auction if this has never been done before. Is there a way to add students to the event as a musical or dance number, or to give a short reflection on how the mission of the school has impacted their experience? Keep an eye on contemporary culture and trends to add relevancy to established events. Don't forget that at some level, any fundraising event should be fun.

Key Components of High Impact Events

Budget

Before event planners become committed to visions of sugar plums and dancing fairies leaping across a perfectly placed stage, start with a clear sense of a budget. Does a line item actually exist for the event, or will all costs be absorbed through profits generated? School resources are hard earned, therefore, it is imperative to approach the spending of any money with a strategic mindset. Are there people in the school's community who can be approached for gifts-in-kind such as design support or to build staging? If tickets will be purchased, has the ticket price been determined as a plan to cover the cost of expenses? If not, how is it determined and how does that impact overall event outcome?

Timeline

As stated before, begin with the end in mind, and start working backward. If an event is scheduled in three weeks' time and planning has not yet begun, there is a good chance that items will fall through the cracks and attendance will be low. Consider the approach to marketing and the building of a timeline by assuming a potential guest's perspective. Last minute marketing and compressed timelines can all too often result in comments such as: "That event isn't for me," or "I wish the school would do something different," or "Why didn't I hear about it?" Much of this often stems from communication or lack thereof. Other vital questions to consider include: "Would I want to attend this?" or, "How soon would I need to mark my calendar for it?" A common pitfall in marketing and the planning of a timeline is not taking the time to pause and consider from a guest's perspective. This is another aspect of event planning for which the perspectives of trusted advisors can be well utilized.

Volunteers

Successful events often have a team of individuals with different skills. Don't just have logistical individuals on an event team. Reach out to people who have an artistic flair and who understand showmanship. Grab the parent on the periphery who likely has interesting ideas and is just waiting to be asked. Volunteers are critical, no matter the event size, to help market any event via word of mouth. And, as a rule of thumb, the more people who are invested in creating the event, the more likely it is that it will be a success. The one man or woman show is a great recipe for burnout, but not for maintaining sanity. Given the time invested, best practices need to be adopted that make any event sustainable. All event leaders and volunteers need to commit to documenting what they have done. And, don't forget to find ways to thank volunteers along the way, as well as at the completion of an event. Whether it is a well-timed, handwritten note or a bottle of wine after a tough planning meeting, a little can go a long way.



Sponsorships and Underwriting

When schools and charities make a sizable net profit, it is usually thanks to a lot of pre-work in the solicitation of sponsors and underwriters. These would be individual or corporate sponsors who are willing to write a check for much more than the cost of a ticket. They usually receive special recognition, such as the “Holy Names Gala presented by the Event Sponsor” on all literature or a sign at the event. There is nothing wrong with thanking these people publicly in multiple ways.

This is an area that cannot be understated. A winning event from a revenue perspective needs to have individuals willing to support the cause beyond the norm. Sometimes the challenge is to determine whom to ask. It is critical that there is a coordinated approach to any solicitations. Successful development is tied to the right person, asking the right person, at the right time, in the right way, for the right thing. While there is an art and science to this process, fear of a negative outcome should not be a deterrent. The worst thing that can happen is someone could say, “No.”

An easy place to start for some potential low hanging fruit is to ask the school business office to whom the school writes checks. For example, there might be a meat supplier who is willing to donate the steaks for the auction in exchange for a table, or being listed as a sponsor. Again, this needs to be a coordinated ask, but there is usually little downside to asking.

Also related to securing sponsorships in advance is the need to secure donors who will commit to attending and to supporting various event activities. It is important to ensure that you have at least one donor ahead of time willing to support any sort of “Fund a Need.” Finally, no one wants to sit through a depressing auction, so be sure to do all necessary homework first. If you have purchased something for an auction and started the bidding lower than its purchase price, have a ghost bidder either driving up the price or at least ensuring the item sells publicly, but the office never sells the item, and therefore doesn’t need to pay for it.

Location

For many schools, the school gym or parish hall is the likely choice for holding an event. Therefore, make sure that a few volunteers exist on the team who can successfully transform the space into your themed wonderland. Before automatically deciding the use of school or parish facilities, be sure to consider all options. There might be a case for holding an event at a Board member’s home if the event is small enough, and there is desire to make it more intimate and special. Often, a choice is made for an off-site location to increase capacity and capabilities.

Spending money to make money

This is a real challenge for any school. In the Catholic school world just as with any organization in the nonprofit world, there is an expectation for responsible stewardship of donor and tuition dollars. Therefore, there can never be a perception that money is being spent unwisely or frivolously. Where to invest dollars to maximize the positive experience of attendees needs to be undertaken from a strategic perspective. Is it more important to have the perfect napkin, or AV equipment that works? Do people really need to have top shelf alcohol, or can they have decent name brands? The most important question to answer is: Where is the best place to spend money that will have the most positive impact?

Do something special and unexpected

Do something special and unexpected, and tie it to the theme of your event or its purpose. Have a small treat created by the students at each table. On the way out of a Parisian-themed event, perhaps guests will receive a macaroon with a small message. Surprise donors with a thank-you card signed by students on their car windshield after they leave. Send a thank-you message the day after with some pictures from the event or take a step further and send a printed photo with a signed message on the back. Stage a flash mob with some of the teachers or volunteers. Never underestimate the power of our senses to make a memory stick. There are a number of approaches that can be taken that will surprise and delight, as well as reinforce that gifts and donations to a school are appreciated.

Succession Planning

Document, document, document – as much, and even more, than can possibly be documented. Begin by building a timeline and a folder of





About the author ...

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David J. Holquin has been involved with Catholic education for over 25 years as a student, employee and board member. In his current position as Director of Development at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose, California, he directs all fundraising efforts with a team of 12 fundraising and support staff. Bellarmine's regular fundraising efforts include planned, capital, endowment and annual giving. He also supervises the Office of Alumni Relations and special events. He recently led the school's first-ever giving day, which saw nearly 1,500 donors contribute almost \$300,000 in one day. Prior to Bellarmine, David served for 11 years at Justin-Siena High School in numerous capacities including Director of Campus Ministry, Summer Programs Director, Director of Admissions, Chief Advancement Officer and Interim Principal.

often-used vendors. It may be that a specific volunteer is only charged with ensuring documentation and the "downloading" of the brains of those in charge, especially if particular individuals have been running the show for a number of years. Invest in taking the time to create a template that can be used by all volunteers to document their activities, contacts, and timelines. There is nothing worse than having to recreate the wheel each year.

Remember they are your guests

No matter if attendees are members of the school's Board or a neighbor from down the street, hospitality is a must. While it may be assumed that everybody understands what hospitality looks like, it is still worth reminding volunteers at check-in that they are the first and last impression of the event. When utilizing student volunteers, be as specific as possible with regard to dress, how to address attendees, conversation starters/stoppers, phones on silent and never in view, and what to do if they need help.

Diversity and Inclusion

A challenge for any event is to make sure the event is inclusive. This can be especially challenging when an event may carry a ticket price of \$250 which may be a stretch for the vast majority of a school's community. It is, therefore, important to find other ways that all members of the school community feel welcome. This could be as a volunteer at the event, or by hosting a less expensive option for the entire community. This sensitivity needs to be equally applied to the choice of any event's theme so as to not inadvertently offend or exclude any one culture. An event should never create or perpetuate a culture that is about "haves and have nots."

A few closing thoughts

Special events have a purpose, and at their essence should in some way be fun. At the end of the day, though, it shouldn't be such a Herculean task to run any event that friendships are lost or employees end up considering leaving a school's community. The highest priority is always to advance the mission of a school and to ensure that future generations continue to experience the life-changing education provided. Don't forget that mission should drive and define all efforts and compelling messages should be designed that showcase how any event furthers a school's mission. Those who speak at any event need to keep the mission close to their hearts as inspiration for their words. As far back as 1912, Archbishop Patrick Riordan of San Francisco noted:

"I have been so many years collecting money for churches and institutions of all kinds that I have come to the conclusion that there is no way of getting it except by personal appeal to those who have it, and that appeal coming from the lips of an enthusiastic speaker."

For further reading about the planning of events, the following are also recommended: "Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service" and "The New Gold Standard, The Story of the Ritz-Carlton." Both provide salient points and remind that at the heart of any great event, whether at home or school, is a grateful host who sees and welcomes all who enter.



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