

Selection of Ideas: Winners You Can Use

Excerpted from
Department of Canadian Heritage
“**Guide to Special Events Fundraising**”

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Fit is the most important factor in choosing which event you should chose. There are thousands of event ideas but which is for you?

Here is a list of major factors to consider. You may have others to add.

The right idea will fit your...

§ Human Resources (volunteer and staff)

- Talents
- Time available
- Interests
- Contacts

§ Financial Resources

- Available Front Money/Investment Capital
- Goals for needed net income

§ Organizational Image

- Preferred profile
- Ethical limitations
- Specific message to communicate
- Seriousness/Fun style

§ Audience

- Interests
- Availability
- Ability to pay/donate
- Long-term connection
- Demographics (age, gender, income)

§ Timing

- Advance planning time
- Competing events
- Seasonal suitability

What a Good Idea for a Special Event!

Too many organizations waste creative energy trying to come up with new ideas that may or may not work. You get no extra marks in fundraising for originality, only for productivity.

Some ideas do get worn out from over-use. This doesn't happen as often as most people think, however. Better to succeed by repeating a proven method than fail inventing something new.

Don't steal other groups' ideas. It's not only unethical, but may be unproductive too. An event that works well in your community once a year might fizzle if tried twice a year. Both groups could suffer.

You may be able to borrow an idea from another city, with modifications. Before you borrow, check with the group that originated the idea. They may already have plans to implement it in your community. Since they thought of it first, they can probably do it better. On the other hand, if they don't see you as a competitor, they may be willing to share their techniques with you.

Consider adapting a classic tried-and-true event like one of these:

§ 1 The 'Stay at Home' Event

People buy a ticket to a non-event, entitling them to stay home and relax. Since most people buy tickets primarily because a friend asked them, actually holding an event may be needless work.

Explain how much money the charity is saving by not arranging a hall, food and entertainment. Point out how much the donor saves, with no expenses for a hair-do, baby-sitter, parking, gas, rented tuxedo, and so on.

This is especially good if your target audience are people who are constantly on the go, who crave a night at home. If your supporters are "party animals" who look forward to a chance to get together, this may not be the right fit.

An extra benefit can be had by scheduling the non-event for the same night as an important television show related to your cause. This could be an investigative report, or a movie dramatizing your issues. It could be a concert starring your artists, or a game your team is playing. Urge people to watch it, and learn more about what you do.

Attach a teabag - donated, of course - to the ticket.

As a modification, you can even encourage the donors to throw their own neighbourhood fundraising tea party. This do-it-yourself event may result in dozen of mini- events on the same night. Each can raise a little money, at minimal cost and send it to you. They can even compete for titles such as 'Most Money Raised', 'Most Fun', or 'Most Innovative'.

§ 2 Give Someone an Award

When someone receives an award, all their friends, relatives and admirers will buy tickets to attend the ceremony. When a business leader gets one, their co-workers, customers, suppliers and hopeful hangers-on buy tickets, too. Even their business competitors may attend. That's why some of the most successful events are dinners in honour of big business leaders. A great many people feel the "invisible command" to attend.

Who you honour profoundly affects who attends and how many tickets are sold.

One group presented awards to two religious leaders and an ambassador in a single ceremony. The staff were disappointed that ticket sales were low. In previous years, they had honoured business leaders, and had much a larger turn-out.

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The religious people were stalwarts, prominent and deserving. They were also brilliant speakers who made the evening entertaining and moving. Yet they could not draw a crowd.

The business leaders had few of these attributes. However, hundreds of people attended. They saw the awards dinner as a chance to network with colleagues and advance their careers.

Advocacy groups that often use confrontation may feel uncomfortable honouring people. Exceptional circumstances may allow it, however. One leader may have shown some progress, no matter how marginal. Recognizing that publicly can be an effective incentive in a social change programme.

A Roast may provide an opportunity to poke fun at someone's foibles, while raising money through their circle of influence. Be careful of the fine line between clever digs and embarrassment. Surprise Party Roasts are seldom a good idea.

§ 3 Rich/Poor Dinner or Third World Feast

At your fundraising dinner, serve some guests a lavish feast of meat, wine, and rich desserts. Others, to their surprise, get rice and beans. Or perhaps a bologna sandwich and a glass of water is their repast. Everyone at the event pays the same price.

The unequal dinners help provide an educational message to all who attend. A brief speech may explain the facts of hunger to all.

The distribution might be completely random, to show the degree to which luck controls our fortunes.

Or if the point is education about racism or sexism and the economy, discriminate against one group for an arbitrary feature. Choose something startling and novel as the feature that results in inequality, such as wearing glasses, or having big ears.

Sometimes it's up to the dinner guests to arrange a better distribution of the scarce resources. Other times, the organization brings out additional high quality meals once the educational point is clear.

§ 4 The Food Fair

To keep the costs down, it's ideal to get all the food and drinks for a dinner donated. Restaurants and suppliers can't always donate all the food for a gala. They can usually afford to give a portion, however.

Chefs from several restaurants, hotels and caterers might each contribute one special signature dish to a gala buffet. The restaurant gets publicity and the guests get a gourmet treat.

Sell the public tickets as for any dinner. Ticket prices can go quite high for this kind of all-you-can-eat buffet if the quality is good.

There are many variations:

- Vineyards, cheese makers and importers might donate a wine and cheese tasting.
- Brewers might offer a chance to sample exotic beers from around the world.
- Pizzerias could contribute several pizzas each, so people could have one mini-slice from each for a taste comparison.
- Chocolate has been used as a theme for events with names like Chocolate Sunday, Chocolate Orgasm, and Death by Chocolate. They offer candy bars, ice creams, cakes, hot cocoa and so on.
- Food fairs can also feature dishes by amateur cooks. They usually agree to pay for all the ingredients. Sometimes the non-profit group can get the ingredients donated. Avoid paying for ingredients, though.

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Here are some examples:

- Celebrity chefs such as media stars, politicians, authors, business leaders or clergy could each contribute one dish.
- The best home cooks provide their specialties.
- An old-fashioned fall fair-style pie-tasting competition can still draw a crowd.
- Men who don't ordinarily cook could compete for the title of Barbecue King or Chili Champion.
- Gourmet box-lunches can be auctioned to office workers at a major downtown tower.
- Dream up your own theme! This is essentially a bake sale, modified to increase the income and decrease the labour.

§5 Unusual Telegram Deliveries

Donors pay you to send a message to friends in a clever way.

On Halloween, tuck a message inside a pumpkin with a carved glad/sad/mad face. Write it in icing on a giant cookie for Mother's Day. Draw it on a balloon for Valentine's Day. Have it delivered by someone in costume on any festive occasion. Some groups have sent belly dancers, clowns, even exotic strippers of either sex within limits! Others send Christmas carollers to sing the message. Someone even tried offering a bouquet of dead flowers for someone you don't like that idea didn't work too well. It could be anonymous or personalized. The limit is your creativity. Imagine the messages.

"Boss, I quit!"

"Happy Mother's Day from all the kids."

"Marylou, I love you. Please marry me."

"Even your best friends won't tell you... here's some mouthwash."

"Happy Birthday, Dad, you're the best."

Sell the service for a reasonable fee. Set up a booth in malls, offices, schools, service clubs, or religious centres. Organize teams of volunteers for publicity, sales, creative services, and delivery.

§ 6 More Tickets for Your Money Raffle

Sell donors 3 tickets for \$2 (or whatever amount) instead of just one. Don't sell fewer than three as a minimum purchase. It feels like a bigger bargain, and if there's more than one prize, actually increases odds of winning.

It's probably best not to offer a discount for multiple purchases, however. Many groups have tried arrangements such as offering tickets at \$2 each, 3 for \$5. In many provinces this is illegal. Even where the law permits it, discounting makes accounting needlessly complex.

§ 7 Put a Price on Everything

Thinking creatively can reveal many more income sources at an event. Organizers routinely charge extra at a cash bar, but why stop there?

- the floral centrepiece

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If you have flowers at an event, someone will take them home. Why not sell them instead? This works especially well if it is an arrangement of dried flowers that will last for a long time.

Get the flowers donated in the first place, of course! Ask florists, garden clubs, or a flower arranging class at a school. One group even got the flowers second hand from a funeral home - don't tell the guests!

- the photo opportunity

If you have a special guest of honour, have someone with a camera take pictures of people with the guest. Sell the pictures.

A simple cardboard frame, sold at most photo supply shops, can be personalized as a souvenir item. Add a printed design, a sticker, label or business card.

A Polaroid camera is best. The immediacy is exciting. Each photo can be autographed. On the other hand, with negatives some people may order several copies of the picture.

Make sure the guest agrees in advance. Time restrictions will limit the number of photos. Make that a selling feature. Advertise "limited quantities only!"

Some groups charge anywhere from \$5 to \$50 for a photo. If the guest of honour has a sense of humour, they may charge even more not to have your photo taken with him/her.

- the encore auction

At a benefit concert, the performer can auction off a choice of encores. The audience can vote with the money they contribute. Anton Kuerti, the classical pianist, has raised thousands of dollars extra this way. He has auctioned up to three encores, for several hundred dollars each.

§ 8 The Hug-a-thon

Friends sponsor a 'racer' to hug as many people as possible in a fixed time, with a donation for every hug. Or a group of people (possibly in couples) pay an entrance fee for a mass hug-in, all at the same time.

Aside from raising money, it reaffirms the positive psychological value of hugging. Donations are raised the same way as with any 'thon'. This is an excellent choice for non-profits concerned with children or mental health.

§ 9 The Quit-a-thon or Slim-a-thon

Friends sponsor people to raise money by giving up smoking. They make a donation for each smokeless day, or even for each cigarette less than the usual habit. Or they sponsor people who are losing weight, offering a few cents or dollars for each gram or ounce lost during the event. This can last weeks or months!

HOT TIP:

How to collect than pledges

The hardest part of most thons is collecting the pledges. This is true for marathons, quit-a-thons, swim-a-thons, dance-a-thons and every other kind.

Collect the pledges in advance! Ask each participant to get the cash as soon as a sponsor promises to help. Make sure they also get the name and address so you can send the tax receipt and ask the sponsor to give again another time.

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This method also collects the most money. Collecting after the event brings in only 50 to 90 % of the pledges.

Second best is to have the non-profit send a letter and reply envelope to each sponsor directly. Do it the day of the event, while it' s still fresh.

The least efficient method is to send the thon participant back to the sponsors to collect and the money and send it in. Too many won' t be bothered.

§ 10 Construct-a-thon or Clean-a-thon

Too many thons raise money and burn calories, but result in no socially useful by-product. Instead, volunteers can be sponsored to clean up garbage in a river bed, or along a roadside. Or they can build wheelchair ramps, renovate a community centre or rehabilitate housing for seniors.

Some groups have even built an entire church in a matter of days. Shades of the old- fashioned barn-raising so common in Canada' s past!

Donors sponsor the activity at so many dollars per hour of work, or metres of progress.