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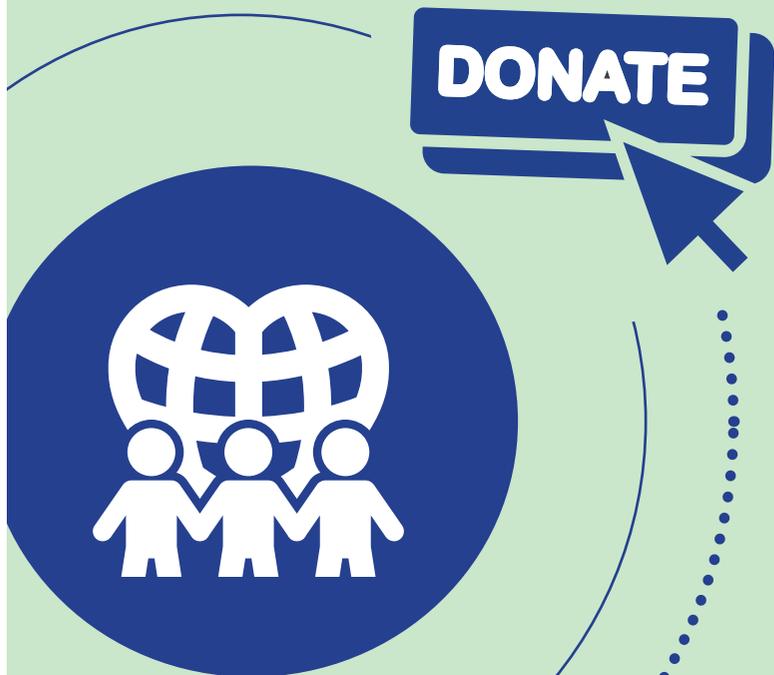
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VIRTUAL FUNDRAISING

Nonprofit experts say technology can help organizations amid pandemic and beyond



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By ADINA GENN

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, nonprofits learned that they could still build community and fundraise virtually, even if they can't gather in-person.

"Technology enabled us to transition seamlessly" including through video and networking, said Hillary Needle, president of Hillary Needle Events, which handles events, many of which are in the nonprofit world.

"We did a test run – we did a campaign on Facebook to see, do we have an audience to build on this with a future, and found, yes, we did," said Aimee Keegan, director of development and community relations of ACLD Foundation.

Wine-tastings, sponsorships - even auctions are possible all while managing costs, they said. Also popular: Shipping wine and food, providing a culinary experience.

A majority of U.S. charitable organizations anticipate that they will raise less money in both 2020 and 2021, than they did back in 2019. That's according to the "Coronavirus Response Survey," by the Association of Fundraising Professionals. The survey, whose findings were released in July, included the participation of 850 fundraisers who received the survey in May.

For nonprofits that rely on events – galas, golf outings and such to build connect with donors – this scenario can be daunting.

But that doesn't mean they can't still raise aware-

ness about their causes, along with those essential dollars that help their community.

Thanks to virtual events, "our clients have been able to meet or surpass their expected fundraising goals," said Melissa Rose, vice president of East Setauket-based Marketing Works.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the company has hosted a virtual golf outing and silent auction; a bike, walk, run; breakfast networking session, wine networking soiree and a gala and awards event.

But with everyone on Zoom these days, it's important to "provide impactful programs," Rose said.

"Since your audience already participants in webinars and spends a lot of time online now, you must be creative in capturing attention," Rose said.



Screen shot of this year's virtually held Long Island Imagine Awards.

With virtual events, there is seemingly no limit as to the kind of event or the extent of audience one can reach, experts said. Played right, the potential is unstoppable.

For example, ACLD last week held "Uncorked for ACLD" - a virtual wine tasting fundraiser, which included a brief presentation from the organization followed by a wine tasting and a question and answer session led by wine experts at Sparkling Pointe Vineyards & Winery in Southold. Supporters gathered virtually online, while sampling from pre-selected wine packages. The evening was filled with all-things sparkling wine, complete with food pairings and cooking tips.

At the recent Long Island Imagine Awards, which benefits nonprofits and includes \$5,000 grants, Needle helped ensure that there were plenty of opportunities for organizations to connect with supporters. The event featured streaming videos, branding opportunities within exhibitor rooms and speed-timed networking opportunities in rooms that each sported a different theme. Additional highlights included networking opportunities before and after the event as well as text-to-donate options.

And for a recent bike-walk-run event, participants signed **up individually or as a team and** had pledged to meet minimum fundraising goals, Rose said. They tracked their results using a fitness app. And to keep participants engaged, the agency's CEO filmed himself completing parts of the bike portion with a GoPro camera. Participants were also encouraged to share action photos on social media, and include a dedicated hashtag.

It's key, Needle said to understand what the audience is receptive to. Some may respond to texting donations, or there might be a "demographic that wants to send in a check," she said.

"Platforms are changing every week," she said, pointing to frequent updates and new components. But this scenario need not cause technology-angst. "Everyone is learning how to do this in real time."

Pre-recorded videos are popular because they

enable nonprofits to prepare elements ahead of the event, experts said.

"Pre-record as much in advance as possible so that you can edit for quality and avoid unnecessary hiccups," Rose said. "Remember to record your event for playback later."

But there's a caveat.

"What may work in-person on stage might not work well on screen. You can generally hold the attention of a live audience for two to three hours - including breaks and meals," Rose said. "On-screen should be customized to the type of program you have."

You'll want to hold the audience's attention. Thoughtful web pages that inform about the event will go a long way, Rose said.

"Keep virtual attendees engaged by using high quality videos, animation, graphics and even feature honorees and guest speakers, as you would during a live event," Rose said. And speakers should be coached - whether live or recorded - both on what they want to say, and even their attire.

And don't forget to use online tools - email marketing and social media - to build awareness about the event, Rose said.

Post-event, poll the audience on their experience.

"Their feedback and your thorough debrief of what worked and what did not, will help you curate better events in the future," Rose said.

And while nothing might beat that interpersonal connection, virtual events can broaden the range of supporters.

Now there's the opportunity to reach people that wouldn't otherwise be able to because they're outside New York, or can't afford a ticket, "but still want to join you," Keegan said.

Needle believes a hybrid event - part virtual, part in-person, "is here to stay" even post-pandemic.

"It opens doors," she said, and adds "another opportunity for engagement."

Organizations can "charge for a virtual access ticket," she said. "It gives an opportunity for someone to get to know your organization at a lower price point."

And she said, it "enhances revenue opportunities," with more branding options for supporters, including with video messaging and digital journals.

"I think it's a bonus," she said.

WINE-TASTINGS, SPONSORSHIPS
AND EVEN AUCTIONS ARE POSSIBLE
ALL WHILE MANAGING COSTS. ALSO
POPULAR: SHIPPING WINE AND FOOD,
PROVIDING A CULINARY EXPERIENCE.