

How to Create *Purposeful* Events in a New Era

By Lynne Wester



The pandemic brought many changes to the world, some of which filtered into the nonprofit sector. One of the positive changes that came out of the pandemic is nonprofits reliance on in-person events. In the years before the pandemic, nonprofits became far too reliant on in-person events as their primary source of engagement—and even at times—fundraising. From runs and walks to galas and get-to-know-you’s, events have run rampant in our industry.

To be clear, we are not living in “post-pandemic” times. The pandemic is global, and it’s active—while some communities are starting to bring down infection rates, not everyone is back to “normal.”

The resurgence of vaccine-resistant variants is still a possibility, and as we’ve learned by now, the virus is anything but predictable. Thankfully, contingency planning is nothing new for event professionals. It’s an exciting time to design what’s next in experiential engagement for our organizations and redesign our thinking around what it means to host an event.

My event experience is shaped primarily by my training at Walt Disney World, where I worked in special events and guest relations before joining the nonprofit workforce. I still benchmark with Disney and credit the education I received at the Disney Institute with helping me be the most successful person I can be. Their concept of the guest experience stays close to me always as I work with nonprofit organizations and donors.

For events themselves, this moment presents an opportunity to leave behind the physical limitations of events and embrace a future of engagement that is more inclusive and without boundaries. This jarring pivot in our world is a singular moment to center everything we do in purpose—to reconnect with the mission and goals of our organizations in a way that creates meaningful engagement experiences. Gone are the days of bowing to “have to” and “we’ve always done it this way.”

Attempting to fulfill those obsolete expectations right now is out-of-touch at best, if not downright negligent.

How do we reshape events for the future? What lessons do we take from the pandemic and apply them to our everyday lives? Pivoting events from in-person to virtual taught us a great deal about people’s attention spans and the idea of entertainment. Attention spans are shorter, time is more precious, and people have made decisions about their increasingly limited free time and how they spend it.

People want shared experiences—they want infotainment that can compete with Netflix and Hulu. Events for events sake are long gone. Furthermore,

with our organizations examining diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts more closely, just gathering wealth in a room with wine and cheese has quickly become outdated and signals a different message than our missions. What will make someone leave their home, their children, the comfort of their couch, and spend time with you?

Having a defined purpose for your event is the sure first step. Gathering people for the sake of gathering is not that purpose, and I’m not sure that doing it to raise money is or has been for a while. Remember that event-based fundraising costs 50-60 cents to raise a dollar, whereas straight major gift fundraising costs 12-20 cents. Once you have your purpose, you should gather people differently than before. People want smaller events, more experiential, and more cause-based. In addition, I can’t think of having events anymore without a virtual/online component. It’s much more inclusive and allows those who want to engage with you the time and space to do so.

To get there, we have to rely on what we do best by rolling up our sleeves and digging into the work at hand.

First, initiate those sometimes difficult, always crucial conversations about why. What were the initial goals of the event? How can these be reimaged in a different form of meaningful engagement? And how will we measure success?

From there, we unleash creative thought and innovation, deploy our unique resourcefulness and deliver an unexpected solution to the problem at hand. This ideation about the attendee experience is essential to our future success and allows us to expand our mental horizons about what it means to gather.

This is how we prove our value as strategic partners and thinkers; how we take our seat at the table where decisions are made about advancement priorities and the ways we achieve them.

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Here are the keys to success with events in our new era.

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- 1. All events must have a purpose.** If gathering people is the purpose, that isn't good enough. Gathering wealthy people who have nothing in common but their giving and your organization isn't good enough anymore. Try gathering them around a specific program or cause instead, giving them a purpose and commonality.
- 2. Don't think large gala and auction and cocktails.** Think experiences—small intimate dinners, and exposure to new people and thoughts.
- 3. Stop having events in country clubs!** Yup, I said it. And I mean it. Where you have your event says as much about your organization as who you have in the room. Often, one of the key event questions that doesn't come up in conversations is what the venue says about your organization. You are an inclusive, welcoming nonprofit, or maybe a place of higher education, or a grassroots organization looking to dazzle. So why are you having your event in a place that for years and perhaps still is inaccessible to everyone? I'm not just talking about overt discrimination and bias, but also implicit bias and unwelcome feelings for others.
- 4. Don't abandon hybrid or online events for all in person**—you will be ignoring a crucial population that chose to interact with you and are also limiting options for participation.
- 5. If you do a hybrid event, make sure you have the resources**—planning- and execution-wise—to create memorable experiences for both the in-person attendees and those online. Usually, the logistics for these events require two different sets of skills. Hire professionals comfortable in the online space.
- 6. A virtual event is not just live streaming what you did in person.** In fact, it's quite the contrary. Think of it like producing a TV show or online story. There needs to be a story and action arc, and there needs to be a sense of show and “edutainment.”
- 7. Realize that event attendees are not always donors,** and you need to segment them in your database that way. Some event attendees cost you money. If all they are doing is attending and not donating, then are these the folks you want to cultivate and have around? Evaluate your ROE (Return on Engagement) carefully.
- 8. Your key mission during in-person events is to ensure your attendees' safety and comfort.** If they don't feel safe, they won't enjoy themselves. Peopling is different now, and we should acknowledge and embrace that. Everything from food service to signage to sanitation stations and check-in should be well thought out and as touch-free as possible.
- 9. Weave the impact of giving into every event.** At every turn, donors should know what their support makes possible, how valuable their presence is and why they are needed now and in the future.
- 10. Finally, stay flexible.** We have no clue what is happening and will happen in the future. Always allow for pivots, changes, and the unexpected, and you will land on your feet.

I cannot stress enough that communication is key in all your efforts—not just internally but also with your key stakeholders. Communicate and be candid about what has changed, what is changing, and what will remain. The new normal is an opportune time to examine all you do, take a deep breath and apply some honesty to your assessment. Events are coming back in-person, but they certainly don't have to come back in the same way they were before. It's our job as professionals to lead the adaptation and attendee experience for those we want to engage. 📍



Lynne Wester strongly believes that donor relations is the key to unlocking fundraising success and that organizations must be as dedicated to the donor experience as they are to the ask itself. Lynne and her teammates at the Donor Relations Guru Group partner with nonprofits large and small

on a variety of initiatives from developing sound strategy and vision to utilizing technology and creating meaningful donor engagement—all designed to positively affect the fundraising bottom line. Her guidance has led her clients to be recognized on the national stage for fundraising innovation, creative communication, and groundbreaking donor relations work.