



10 BEST PRACTICES FROM VIRTUAL FUNDRAISING EVENTS

With in-person fundraising events cancelled due to COVID-19, disease-focused foundations have shifted to virtual events. While this shift was made out of necessity, nonprofit leaders have discovered that virtual events—when done well—have many benefits.

As part of the [HBS Kraft Accelerator Leadership Forum](#)—based on the urgent need for creative fundraising in 2020—several foundation leaders recently shared best practices and lessons learned from their virtual event experiences.

1 View a virtual event as part of a continuous life cycle, not an episodic event.

Too often nonprofits have viewed a major fundraising event like the annual gala as a one-time episodic event. A more effective approach is to think holistically, viewing a virtual event as part of an integrated, continuous life cycle.

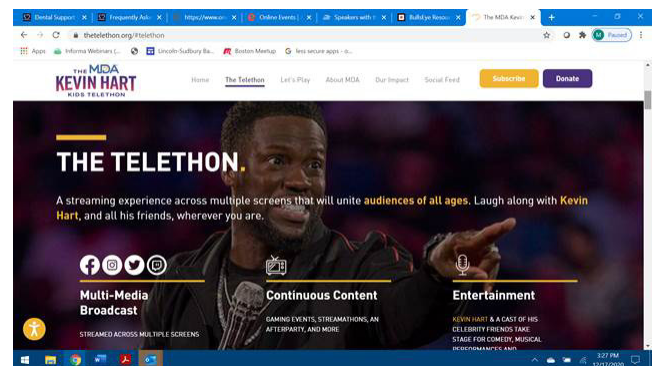
This means there is outreach and engagement prior to the event; there is interaction during the event; and there is ongoing follow-up after the event. An event doesn't stand alone; it is part of an integrated, ongoing approach to communicating and interacting with donors.

2 Use virtual events to energize (or reenergize) the brand

Traditional in-person events like 5k walks and runs or annual galas touch only the small number of people at the event. But creative virtual events using social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, and gaming platforms like Twitch, provide an opportunity to increase the awareness and relevance of a nonprofit's brand.

An example is the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA), which viewed the financial challenges from the pandemic as an opportunity to think big and outside of the box. MDA reimagined and rethought its famed MDA telethon, which last took place in 2015. The goals were to provide a significant and necessary short-term fundraising boost, while introducing the MDA brand to a new generation. The telethon was livestreamed on YouTube, Twitch, and other platforms. This event attracted more than 1.5 million visitors, had more than 500,000 live viewers on Twitch watching a game-a-thon, produced 5 billion impressions, and generated millions of dollars in cash donations and millions more of in-kind contributions and total value.

For MDA, rebooting the telethon provided short-term funds while serving as a “springboard for the future” in jumpstarting long-term brand building.



3 Make it fun and entertaining.

Some virtual events, such as webinars, might have an educational purpose. But a virtual fundraising event is NOT an educational webinar. The goal is to generate donations and long-term fans by engaging people, entertaining them, and moving them emotionally. Leadership Forum participants described weaving in compelling stories of people who suffer from the disease along with laughter, music, and entertainment. Make it fun so people will have positive thoughts and will come back again.



5 Structure opportunities for organic interaction.

Part of what made EBRP’s virtual poker event successful was giving participants around the world the opportunity to engage with one another. This was unstructured, unscripted, and completely organic. It led families affected by the disease to make connections with other families, facilitated by EBRP—and led to some big donations on the spot. EBRP’s advice: Create the environment to allow these connections to occur organically.

6 Engage celebrities.

The MDA Telethon was hosted by Kevin Hart and EBRP had a virtual event headlined by Eddie Vedder. In both instances these celebrities care deeply about the cause, donated their time, and were actively engaged in attracting other celebrities. The presence of celebrities can help generate PR and attract participants. A best practice is to encourage celebrities to post about your event on the various social media accounts. Also, think about the ideal role and involvement of celebrities after the event.

7 Attract corporate partners and sponsors.

MDA partnered with Salesforce, which supplied extensive in-kind services, and MDA secured participation from more than 100 sponsors, such as Citgo, Albertsons, Applebee’s, and Shake Shack. EBRP secured sponsorship from Amazon Web Services, Deloitte, RBC, and many others. Sponsors are attracted by strong brands with extensive reach.

8 Secure the rights to the content and repurpose it broadly.

Putting on a virtual event requires thinking differently. No longer is it necessary to get permits from a town for a local road race or hire a band for the big gala. Organizations want to think about platform partners for livestreaming and want to secure the rights to all content so it can be repurposed in multiple ways. This requires different types of organizational skills, such as digital content negotiation and distribution.

4 Focus on expanding the organization’s reach.

Participation in an in-person event is largely limited to those in the immediate geography. So, a major gala in New York or Los Angeles mainly attracts people who live in or near those cities. But as organizations have discovered, virtual events eliminate the geographic barriers to participate.

An example is the EB Research Partnership (EBRP) which previously hosted a 500-person poker fundraiser in New York City, where tickets were \$500 per person. In shifting to a virtual event, EBRF lowered the ticket price to \$100. The result was thousands of additional participants spread across the globe. The virtual event raised almost as much as prior in-person events, but the net proceeds were higher since the costs to conduct a virtual event were so low.

The lesson: don’t just turn an in-person event into a digital event. Rethink the entire event. Lower the barriers to entry. Change how the event is structured.

An advisor to the Forum suggested having a lower barrier to enter and participate, with add-on fundraising activities taking place throughout the event.



9 Give major donors special treatment.

One organization delivered special popcorn boxes to its major donors the night of its virtual event, as a unique way to recognize these important donors. Other organizations have sent gourmet meals or wine. The lesson here is even when taking advantage of digital technology to increase your reach and donor base, don't forget your most important donors and treat them as the VIPs that they are.

10 Develop new metrics.

Historically a key fundraising metric has been "funds raised the night of the event." However, in thinking about virtual events as part of a life cycle, focusing only on funds raised at the event is too narrow. A new model is required with new metrics. Other metrics may be funds raised by sponsors prior to the event; number of new names/participants at the event; number of donations during the event; number of times the event is viewed after it occurred, and how many donations were generated by post-event views.

In the spring of 2020 as in-person events were cancelled, disease foundations felt a sense of gloom and doom. But the success of virtual fundraising events over the past few months has shown the potential for new models in expanding a nonprofit's reach, building its brand, and extending its donor base. MDA CEO Lynn Vos said, "The lesson is to take advantage of the moment. Don't sit quietly and do nothing. Take action." This is just the beginning of gaining experience with new models of engaging donors and raising funds.