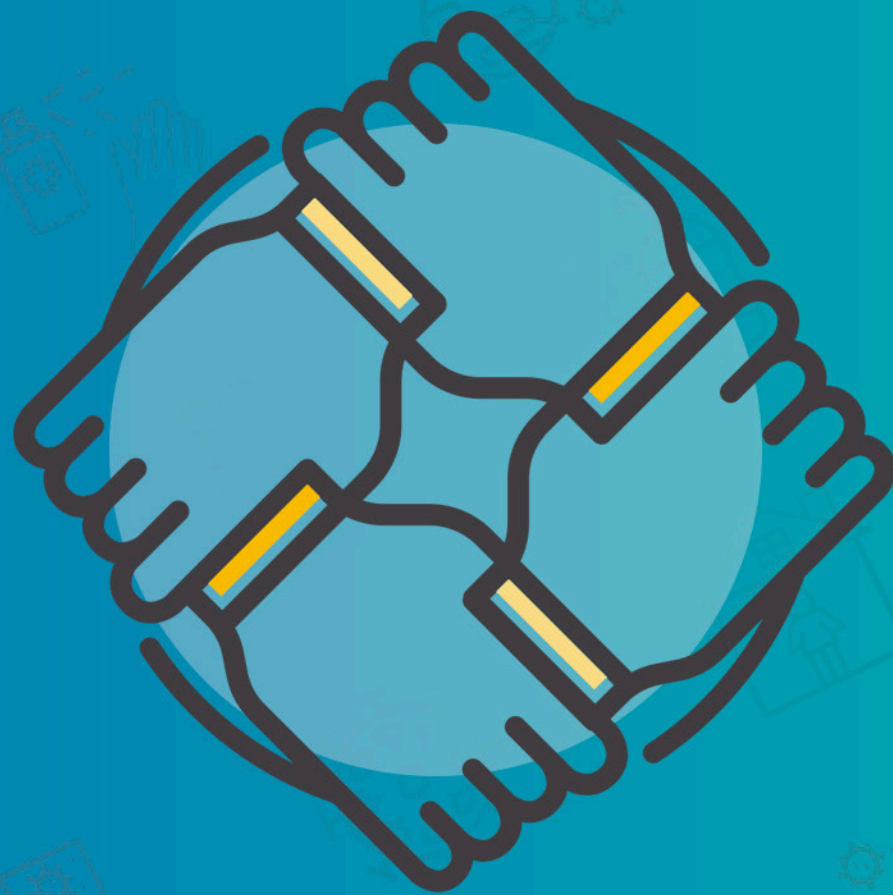


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Robin Thompson
Fundraising Solutions



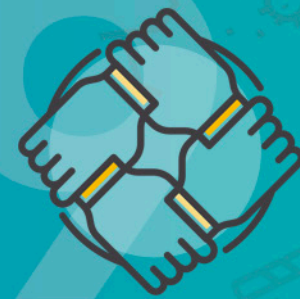
TWENTY- NINE

Creative Fundraising Ideas for
**VIRTUAL EVENTS DURING &
AFTER COVID-19**

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Foreword: Fundraising Through a Pandemic: Leveraging Creativity & Innovation



The fundraising landscape is poised for innovation and reinvention. New social distancing norms and the cancellation of in-person events sent supporters from the ballroom into their living rooms and nonprofit professionals back to the drawing board.

2020 will be marked as the beginning of a massive change in the way nonprofits use innovation to deepen donor engagement. We believe that there is a unique window of opportunity presented by the pandemic for nonprofits to try new ideas, new approaches and lean into virtual fundraising.

The digital transformation will extend far beyond COVID-19, driving fundraising efficiency and donor strategies. Donors have grown accustomed to engaging with and giving to their causes online. Now is the perfect time for nonprofits to harness creative fundraising to connect supporters to your cause and attract new donors to your base.

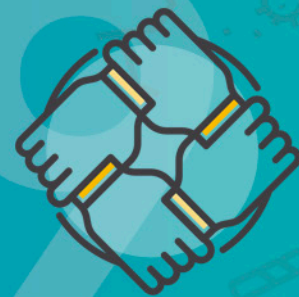


Our goal with this Ebook is to help nonprofits leverage creative ideas for year-round giving and cultivation. We designed this guide with you in mind - to help all nonprofits navigate a new virtual fundraising frontier, but also encourage those who are still uncertain how to continue their fundraising.

The new landscape of fundraising looks different. May these ideas, strategies and best practices help you raise more and reach more.

ROBIN THOMPSON & THE ONECAUSE TEAM

Twenty-Nine Creative Ideas for Event Fundraising During and After COVID-19



Have you had a fundraising event that was ...

___! ___ **RESCHEDULED?**

___! ___ **CANCELED?**

___! ___ **DELAYED?**

___! ___ **POSTPONED?**

___! ___ **DOWNSCALED?**

___! ___ **SHUTTERED?**

___! ___ **MOVED INSIDE?**

It is likely that one of these situations has happened to you, if your event was scheduled after March 2020. Many of us hoped that by the end of the year our lives would be back to normal and we'd be fundraising in-person once again. But COVID-19 had different plans.

What is a nonprofit to do with their fundraising events this year and beyond?

[In the 2020 Fundraising Through a Pandemic Survey by OneCause](#), 2,000 fundraising professionals were surveyed on their fundraising outlook and plans for 2021. Their plans for fundraising in and beyond a pandemic might surprise you. They told us that:



This data also reinforces a new reality in event fundraising: we need innovative strategies to deliver creative, engaging, safe, and seamless giving experiences to meet the challenges of a changed fundraising world. Leaving nonprofits searching for new formats to fundraise, and making one thing certain:

VIRTUAL EVENTS WILL CONTINUE TO BE A FUNDRAISING NECESSITY.

We need to embrace what we can do now, and how to meet donors where they are most comfortable. The good news: there are a multitude of ways to continue event fundraising by being creative and innovative.

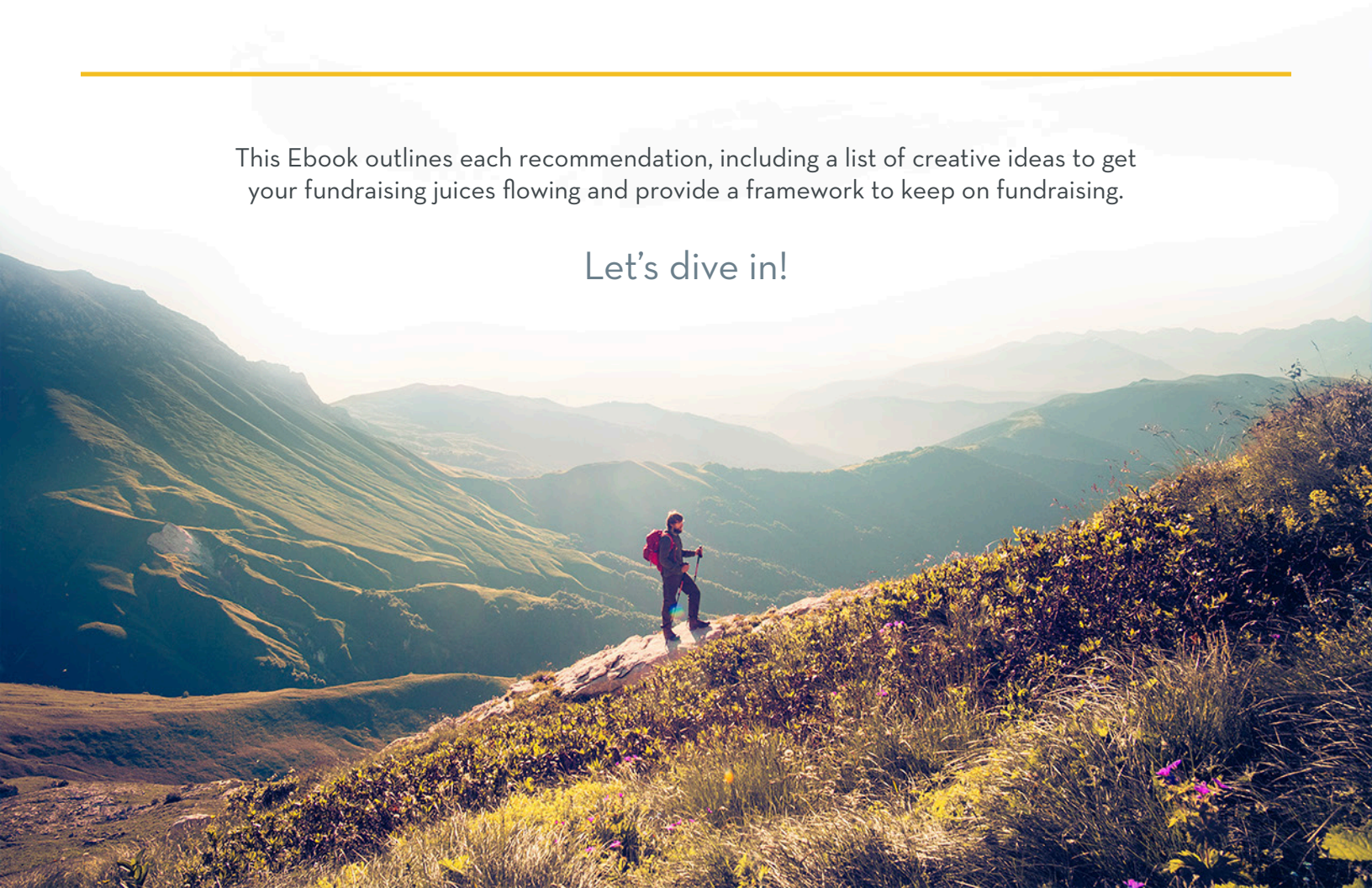
From April to June 2020, Robin Thompson interviewed eleven nonprofit experts on her weekly webinar. She discussed event fundraising, what was working during COVID-19, what wasn't and ideas for innovating during a crisis.

From these conversations came seven cornerstone recommendations to fundraise in a virtual world:

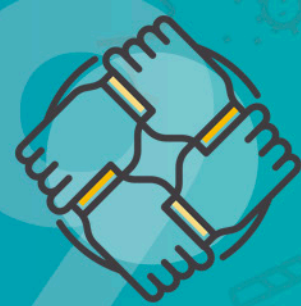
1. [RE-IMAGINE THE IN-PERSON EVENT](#)
2. [CREATE AN EVENT THAT IS A HYBRID OF BOTH IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL](#)
3. [LOOK AT CONFERENCES FOR IDEAS](#)
4. [USE PEER-TO-PEER FUNDRAISING](#)
5. [BECOME REALLY GOOD AT STORYTELLING](#)
6. [GET RID OF THE NOTION THAT WE NEED A SINGLE LARGE EVENT](#)
7. [MAKE YOUR EVENT FUN](#)

This Ebook outlines each recommendation, including a list of creative ideas to get your fundraising juices flowing and provide a framework to keep on fundraising.

Let's dive in!



Re-imagine the in-person event

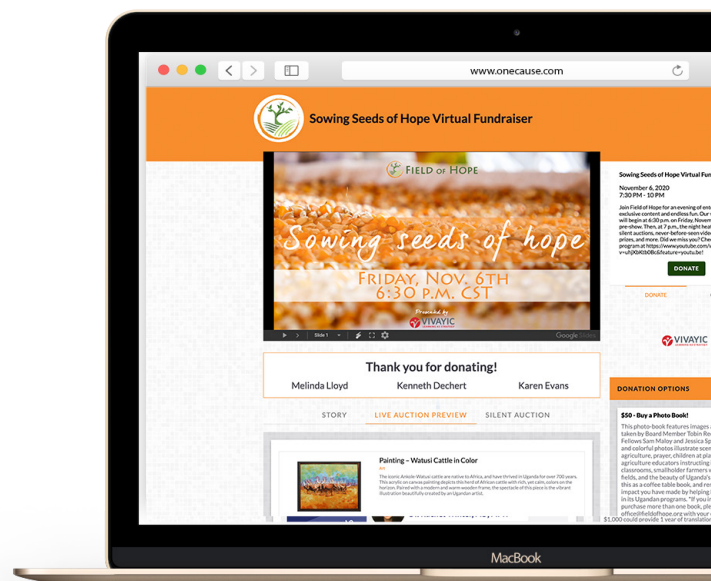


In the many months since COVID-19 began, nonprofits have been on a rollercoaster of whether to have, postpone, or cancel their event. With pandemic information changing rapidly, the only thing certain: more uncertainty.

Those nonprofits who had rescheduled their events from the spring to the fall were facing another tough decision. Even if they could gather in-person, many folks might not be comfortable in a crowd. After much consideration, many nonprofits chose to have a virtual event instead. There is much we can learn and glean from these virtual pioneers.

First, consider how to make the online switch. We recommend asking yourself the following questions when re-imagining your event for a virtual world:

- *What financial results do you need from your event?*
- *What feelings do you create with your face-to-face event? How can you create these online?*
- *What parts of your event are core to your mission? How can you create those moments virtually?*
- *What fundraising activities do we have? How can we make them engaging online?*
- *Do we need technology or software to help us go online?*



Re-imagine the in-person event



Once you have the basic questions answered, then determine how your event will work, how it will engage supporters, and how your nonprofit will measure success. Here's a few ideas to get you going:

CREATIVE VIRTUAL IDEAS:



1. Arrange virtual walks/runs. Participants can take a photo of themselves on their walk or run and then share it on the organization's website. Create a landing page with a call to action that is asking for donations or getting involved in the event.
2. Host a virtual gala table. Ask your Board members if they would be willing to host "virtual tables" where they can rally their network around the cause. This is a great way to engage your Board and attract more attendees than anticipated.
3. Organize a virtual cocktail party with as many people as you like. Send a party package filled with wine, cheese, crackers, or local sponsor treat to guests and then hold your virtual cocktail party online.
4. Arrange a virtual golf tournament where each group plays their own round and then posts fun photos, great shots, etc. Maybe it could include virtual reality where some people can play a course at home using inexpensive virtual reality headset glasses and their phone that includes a golf course app.



Eagle River
Watershed Council



a seriosfun camp

Two nonprofits who re-imagined their events are *Eagle River Watershed Council* and *Roundup River Ranch*.

Re-imagine the in-person event

Eagle River Watershed Council

The Eagle River Watershed Council holds an annual Wild and Scenic Film Festival to celebrate environmental and community awareness. It was scheduled for April 2020. Since people would not be allowed to gather together in the theater because of COVID-19, they chose to do the event virtually.



Eagle River
Watershed Council



James Dilzell, Education and Outreach Coordinator said, “We realized that since it was virtual, we didn’t have a limited capacity. So rather than making it a set ticket price of \$20, we opted to do donation-based ticket sales. We marketed it at \$1 to \$100—whatever anyone wanted to give. The ticket sales ended up being very successful; we had folks give \$1, most folks gave \$20 and we had a couple of people give \$200 with plenty giving \$100. It really was a wide range of support and provided us with a good amount of funding.

“We added a silent auction online that we typically do each year at the film festival. We had it open for a week before the virtual event. It gave people time to peruse and then during the event, we gave it a big push. It was a lot more successful than we expected.”

“Our reach was about 370 this year which was more than double what we can do in our in-person events. A downside to virtual was not having face to face contact. When we have it at the theater in the future, we’ll add a virtual component, both live streaming and recording it.”

Roundup River Ranch

Roundup River Ranch provides a week-long camp for children with serious illnesses. They knew that any in-person event couldn’t happen with the kids since many have compromised immune systems. Instead they chose to try a few new approaches so donors could connect to the mission and appreciate the importance of funds to support the campers.

Grace Anshutz, formerly the Special Events & Grassroots Fundraising Manager at Roundup River Ranch, said they re-imagined the camp experience as well as a 5K event.

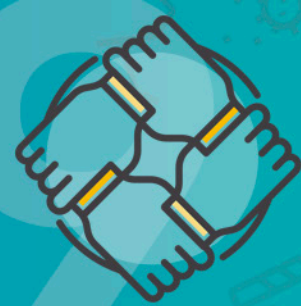
Grace said, “When another event, the Colfax Marathon race was canceled, we decided to have our first-ever virtual 5K. With this type of virtual event, the expenses were minimal except for some staff time. Using our peer-to-peer fundraising from our Superhero Ski Day event, we were able to get a campaign up and running via social media. Through an innovation grant, we also raised \$17,000, an awesome amount considering that about 50% of those donors were first-time donors.

“By having it virtually, we could send out challenges encouraging people to share via hashtag and start a movement of positivity and light. We received so many positive emails from vendors recognizing that we are trying to be a beacon of hope not only for our program recipients, but also our donors. It also provided an opportunity for people who can’t traditionally support us in the area they live, including our international volunteers and staff.”



a seriousfun camp

Create an event that is a hybrid of both in-person and virtual



Hybrid events blend the best of both worlds (face-to-face and virtual). Many organizations are on the cutting edge of learning what works and what doesn't for these "dual-experience" fundraisers.

We recommend asking yourself the following questions, when re-imagining your hybrid event:

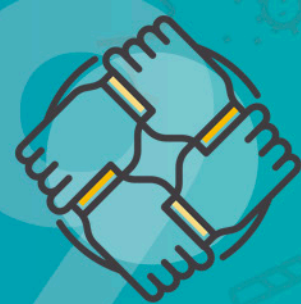
- *What are your goals for engagement both virtual and in-person?*
- *How will the two experiences be different? What elements of the event will be the same?*
- *What will the in-person program look like?*
- *What will the virtual attendees see and use?*
- *How will virtual and in-person guests donate? How will they buy tickets?*
- *What technology do you need to support the hybrid experience?*
- *What does success look like?*

CREATIVE HYBRID IDEAS:



5. Tap into youth or people who have the time and talent to share art, music, etc. Have an "art" show that some guests can attend in person and also host an online auction where items are auctioned off to the highest bidder.
6. Record board, staff and recipient interviews and play them on the night of the event. Have small viewing parties at houses or restaurants. Everyone, both in-person and those online, can participate in the live auction from wherever they are.
7. Hire a chef and/or a bartender to create exclusive dining or food experience for a small group of in-person VIPs. Use Zoom, or online event platform to host small online groups in the event.
8. Schedule a craft class where you have an expert teach knitting, crocheting, sewing, or painting. Some people will attend in person, socially distanced, while others attend virtually.
9. Hold a *Party with a Purpose*. Instead of a huge gala, hold a small patio, deck or living room event with a group or groups of online attendees. Charge an amount per couple to attend - create different price points for the in-person and virtual attendees. Try to secure a matching gift to help inspire giving and amplify donations.

Create an event that is a hybrid of both in-person and virtual



Roundup River Ranch

Roundup River Ranch historically held a large gala of over 250 attendees and raised close to \$1 million. For their 2020 event, they decided to try a hybrid model. They kept their expectations low, not knowing how it would turn out.

According to Grace, “Each sponsor was sent an ‘event in a box’ that contained a letter and brochure describing the event. Then each sponsor was given the opportunity to create whatever experience they wanted.



a seriousfun camp

Each sponsor invited people, or was given a list of people to invite, with no more than 50 in attendance. Some of them chose to have it in their house, on their patio or some even rented a restaurant. There were over 25 different locations where the events were held.

Each house had a catered dinner delivered to them.

“When possible, staff, board members or volunteers attended each of the locations. They had to turn down volunteers for the events because there were so many who wanted to be a part of it. Most of the program was pre-recorded with interviews and stories of campers, donors, executive director, board members and volunteers. The auction was the only live part of the event. It appeared on television and computer screens at each location in real-time. The magic was that at each place, people were bidding and seeing others bid at the same time which created the excitement of being at a huge gala in person.”

This was a highly successful alternative that they plan to do again because it was so fun, economical and well-received.

Look at conferences for ideas



The National Speakers Association (NSA) 2020 summer conference had to be canceled. Knowing that speakers' calendars had been totally wiped clean, NSA wanted to try something innovative. They challenged themselves to create a conference model that could provide a similar feeling of togetherness and education.

Three months prior to the planned convention date, they began having two virtual educational meetings per week with nationally recognized speakers delivering inspiration and entertainment. It culminated in a 2-day virtual experience including dancing and an awards ceremony with people dressed to the nines, all on Zoom. Other associations have since used it as a model for their events.

What nonprofits can learn from associations and conferences is how to become really good at engaging our donors and volunteers over a longer time period, beyond a single-night event.

Use the following questions to take inspiration from virtual conferences:

- *What virtual conferences are in your area or industry?*
- *What did they do for programming?*
- *How do they drive engagement (activities, games, networking, groups)?*
- *What perks, incentives and or special experiences did they use?*
- *Do they conduct any fundraising? If so how?*

CREATIVE CONFERENCE IDEAS:



10. Secure celebrity participation like having someone from the cast of a television series, or some current show who shows up virtually at your online event.
11. Create a social calendar that includes gourmet gatherings, classes in family history, planned giving, history, conservation and whatever relates to your nonprofit.
12. Plan virtual trivia nights where you can include fun facts about your nonprofit.
13. Mail a funny mascot like a hand-held puppet or stuffed animal each week for people in the group who then take it with them everywhere; snapping photos of it at the beach, ski slope or binge-watching TV. Circulate these photos to others with a tagline tying it to your nonprofit.

Use peer-to-peer fundraising

Peer-to-peer fundraising can bridge the gap between an in-person event and virtual fundraising. The success of peer-to-peer fundraising is that people engage others who they know to participate in the fun and fundraising. People who may have never heard of your organization now have contact to it and may even become a future donor.

Because peer-to-peer fundraising emphasizes network over net worth, it's important to create “share-worthy” events. When you are excited about it, others can get inspired too. Post an idea on social media and say that you are creating an event that involves people doing silly things, funny stunts or painting a picture, etc. Ask for their suggestions.

You'll be amazed at how the collective building of ideas can help you create something fun and engaging as people share and amplify each other's ideas. The beauty in collective engagement is that now you have people who are already involved wanting it to be successful and will participate and tell their friends so that it goes viral!

Many nonprofits have redesigned their peer-to-peer events during the pandemic with creative and exciting ways to get people to join in. Fundraising walks that typically were large gatherings in cities were changed to virtual walks, runs, or challenges that took place entirely online, bringing fundraising and fun to the virtual world.



Use peer-to-peer fundraising



Scavenger Hunt

A small town in Colorado organized a scavenger hunt, where they provided clues on their website. For instance, “Find and name the recreational path named after Avon’s most famous person and then take a team picture on it.” Historical societies are also staging scavenger hunts by giving people clues to find historic locations.

Online Activities & Games

Caregiver Connections is a nonprofit in Edwards, Colorado that supports caregivers by providing activities and interaction for older adults while the caregivers get a much-needed break. Their regular in-person gathering transitioned to sessions online. Everyone now is participating in activities and games virtually. Of course, there were skeptics as to how to overcome the technology challenges, but now more than ever, necessity is the mother of invention. They are learning and enjoying it immensely.



Virtual Celebration Programs

The Morgan Marie Michael Foundation got creative by transforming their annual in-person event into a virtual celebration. One person was an accomplished and award-winning tap dancer. She asked for people to sponsor her tap dancing with two left tap shoes while singing “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” She reached her goal and recorded it for a hilarious rendition. They created other challenges too that were equally well received.

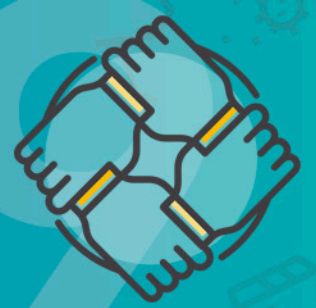


CREATIVE PEER-TO-PEER IDEAS:



14. Create a citywide scavenger hunt where people walk, bike or drive to pre-assigned locations and answer questions at each site. At each place, there are questions related to a theme such as environmental, wildlife, historical, etc. One nonprofit had people form teams and each person donated \$40 to play. There were 12 stops in three hours and it culminated in a party outside with prizes. Their scavenger hunt raised almost \$10,000.
15. Create online challenge campaigns around a theme and have teams complete activities, games, or hit fundraising goals. The ideas are endless, from physical competitions to shower strikes, and virtual bowling events, you can harness the power of peer-groups and competitive giving to deepen engagement and drive results.
16. Create a location for art expression whether it is colored chalk in a driveway, wall art or creating a mural where several people take turns to complete it.
17. Have people submit photos that are related to a topic you choose like favorite hangout, funniest dog or cat, etc. Ask sponsors to donate coupons for a free dinner or drink. Have your social media fans choose their favorite photo and the winner gets a coupon.

Become really good at storytelling



The pandemic is reminding us that without being able to interact normally with our donors, we need more compelling ways to get them to engage with us and our nonprofit's story.

When people feel deep emotion, their brain releases the chemical dopamine. They feel emotionally attached which helps them relate to the story and builds an active connection to the cause. When nonprofits engage in effective storytelling, they increase the likelihood that supporters want to be a part of the solution, and activates that feeling into giving or volunteering for the organization.

In a virtual world, it's even more important to tell and share powerful stories about your mission. Without the face-to-face connection and in-person fundraisers, we need to both humanize our brands and create emotional bonds to our nonprofits.

We recommend answering the following questions to help tell your story:

- *What is unique to your cause or your event that will stand out?*
- *What impact stories can you share, about how your nonprofit or fundraising made a difference?*
- *How can you showcase your mission statement in images?*
- *Who are real-life heroes you can feature?*

According to the [OneCause Social Donor Study](#), today's donor wants mission impact at the forefront of communications and storytelling. Mission messaging drives deeper connection and affinity to the cause. Think beyond event themes and taglines with designing your virtual events. Why your organization exists and the impact derived from donations should be core to your communications, messaging, and marketing.



Social Donor Study - Top 3 Motivators

Become really good at storytelling



When I, Robin Thompson, was a young child, we would drive seven hours to the beach.

The windows were rolled down in the baby blue 1964 Buick Skylark, but the temperature was stifling. My brother and I would be bickering with each other. We drew a line down the center of the backseat during the other one to cross it, as we screamed insults in between hitting each other. That was until Mom diverted our attention using the Burma Shave signs along the side of the road to keep us busy.



Each sign was red with white lettering and had only two to four words written on it. The next one, in two or three miles, also had just a few words written on it. We had to remember the words of the previous signs to keep up with the mystery. After several miles, we finally got to read the last one and solve the riddle. For instance, the successive signs said: Big Mistake—Many Make—Rely on the Horn—Instead of the—Brake. Then the next set of signs would start and the joke or rhyme would keep us engaged again.

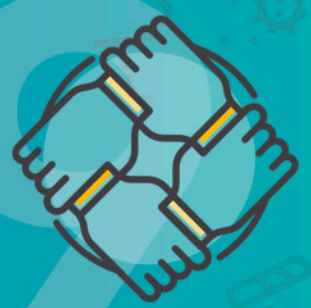
This is a model you can use to tell your story. What if you told a story about your recipients a few words at a time in your emails, snail-mail letter or social media? It is like the binge-worthy shows that have mystery and intrigue, and you control the dripping of the content. If you create anticipation, tension, and captivate their attention, people will read your emails, social media and watch your videos. And more than watch, you can and will increase their desire to give!

CREATIVE STORYTELLING IDEAS:

18. Ask your constituents how their lives have changed as a result of your nonprofit. Then use that story as one example of the good work being done.
19. Get a YouTube channel. Have people record their stories and post them as well as posting on social media.
20. Create a challenge that can go viral and turn into a powerful story that you can tell. Search for the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. What makes that so successful? Could you create a story around an idea like that?



Analyze your opportunity cost



Ask yourself, “How much did it cost your nonprofit to put that large event together?”

Most organizations do not look at their events from an opportunity cost perspective. You need to look at hard expenses AND time spent – both are an important calculation to assess overall cost effectiveness.

Challenge yourself/team to look at past events through a “total cost” lens. An easy framework includes:

- *Analyze the hard costs: flyer design, mailing, venue rental, food, decorations, etc., and examine both the direct and indirect costs.*
- *Make sure to include hard costs that may have been booked and paid for in a previous year or budget cycle.*
- *Multiply the number of hours expended times the employees’ salaries and add that into your costs.*
- *Keep track of the volunteer hours. Even though you don’t pay them, it can be a lost opportunity cost. Your volunteers are only available to you for a certain number of hours, and they must be used wisely. And don’t forget about burnout—for you, your staff, and your volunteers.*

MORE FUN IDEAS:



21. Create a virtual picnic version of your event.
22. Sponsor online luncheons or smaller in-person luncheons at individual homes.
23. Collaborate among different groups, for example between a music-related nonprofit and a children’s nonprofit and then livestream a concert for kids.
24. Hold online awareness and educational events that do not include any fundraising – these will help you cultivate deeper connections with supporters.
25. Have a virtual book presentation by an author.
26. Invite small groups to different locations and livestream between them. Create head-to-head competition for games or challenges.

Make your event fun

The Wall Street Journal recently reported this about the importance of fun: In the height of the Great Depression, with a quarter of the working-age population officially unemployed, the Marx Brothers had the country falling in the aisles.

Abbott and Costello were Hollywood's highest paid entertainers during World War II. This wasn't idle diversion or dangerous delusion, rather it was a necessary respite from ever-present anxiety. We can't live in a state of constant agita. We need a break. That's what having fun events will provide for our donors, participants as well as ourselves – welcome fun into our lives.

THE PUBLIC.

Public Theater New York City

Historically, Public Theater, a New York City arts organization founded as the Shakespeare Workshop, held a gala that usually cost thousands of dollars for a table. This year it was free to all having been livestreamed on their website, YouTube and Facebook. It included celebrities like Meryl Streep, Ann Hathaway, Elvis Costello, Sting, Alicia Keys and many other famous people. They sang and danced to tunes from musicals. For the Children's Diabetes Foundation they had comedy legend, Jay Leno as Master of Ceremonies. He used his wit to keep it light and fun. They included other celebrities like George Clooney and Jane Fonda.

Create events that are fun for you to plan and be involved in. Invite your staff, board, donors and volunteers to be part of the planning and the party.

FINAL FUN IDEAS:



27. Create Laughter First Aid boxes with joke books, funny toys and other props and send them to your donors.
28. Brainstorm with your donors and volunteers about what is fun for them during this time. Can you incorporate that into your event? Maybe it is having an ethnobotanist livestream hunting for wild plants or offering a papermaking class or a deep dive into types of tea or coffee.
29. Since physical fitness is so important to everyone, gather a group of people to pledge to "move" 50 miles in a month under their own power. Get corporate and medical community sponsors to provide prizes to the participants. The registration fees will give them yet another opportunity to donate to your nonprofit.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has presented fundraisers with an opportunity to do different things and do the same things differently. Let's be clear, many of us would not have chosen this route, since what we were doing seemed to be working just fine. But sometimes, in the face of adversity, we discover innovation, creativity, and new approaches that can help us grow now and beyond the pandemic.

Actor Sam Waterston, longstanding supporter of Public Theater, said "While the pandemic has shuttered live events, it is not a fatal blow..." He added "This is not the end of the story, by any manner of means. We have to hang on to our hope."

We have to hang on to our hope. . . Let that be our mantra and we will get through this and be that much stronger. We in the nonprofit community will continue to help build impact, create social good, and work together for a greater cause.

We can and will come out of this stronger and more resilient – together!

About The Author

Robin Thompson has over two decades of experience in fundraising as Executive Director and Vice President for Development for several nonprofit organizations.

As a Vail, Colorado based fundraising consultant, trainer and coach, Robin works with large and small nonprofits throughout North America and internationally. She has a unique ability to share knowledge, concepts and best practices in a fun way with outstanding results. As a Certified Virtual Presenter, her programs are informative and engaging!

Robin earned a fundraising certificate from Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. Her BS degree is from West Virginia University and she has a Masters Degree from the University of Utah. Robin is the author of two books: Putting the Fun in FUNdraising: The Secrets to Raising More Money Faster and Easier as well as Know Stress to No Stress—A Guide to Achieving Life Balance.

www.robinthompson.com

About OneCause

OneCause is committed to helping cause-driven organizations amplify their message and raise more funds with easy-to-use fundraising solutions. OneCause offers a full suite of solutions including online giving, event management, mobile bidding, and peer-to-peer fundraising for nonprofit organizations of all sizes. Since 2008, OneCause has supported more than 20,000 fundraising events and campaigns, helping nonprofits raise more than \$2 billion. Located in the marketing technology hub of Indianapolis, OneCause has been recognized on the Inc. 500 list of Fastest Growing Companies, received a TechPoint MIRA award for Mobile Technology Excellence & Innovation, and is a five-time Stevie® Award winner for excellence and innovation in Customer Service.

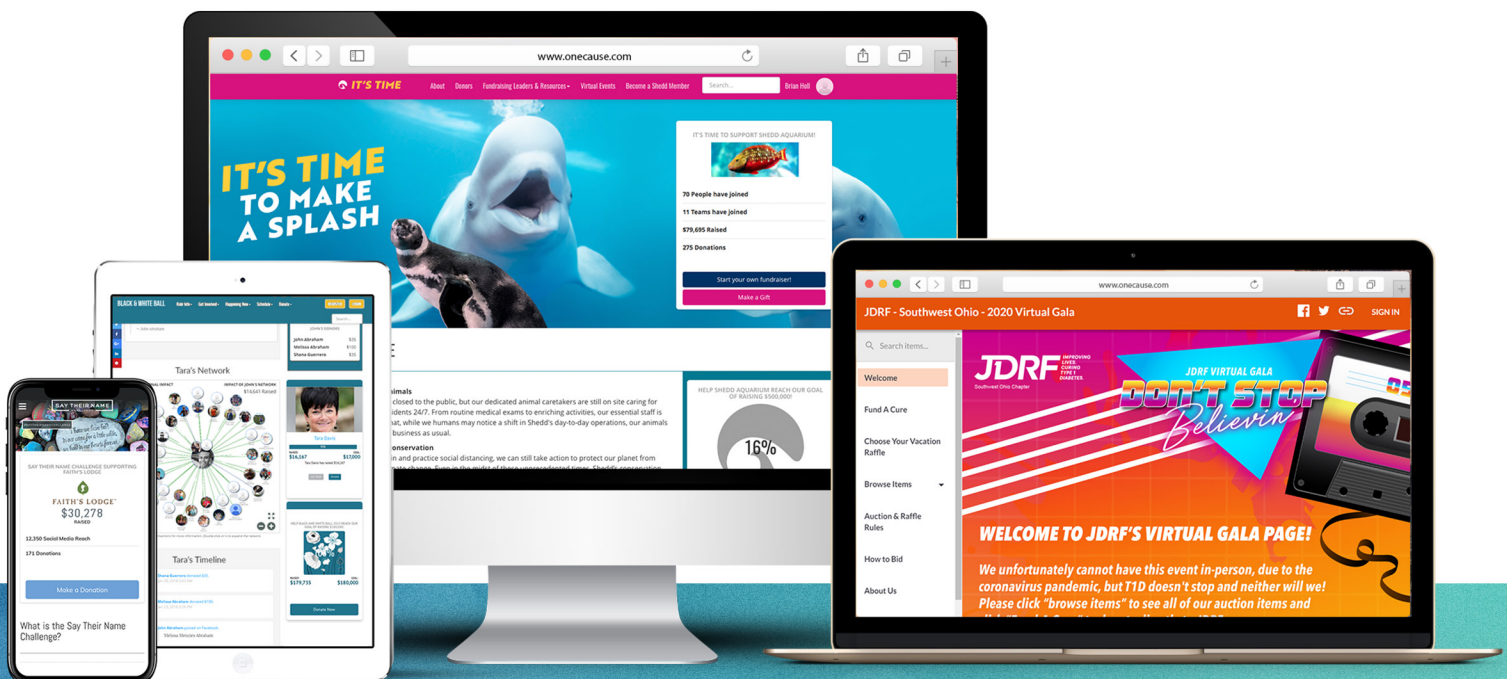
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