

# New approach for fundraising events



Photo: Sugar Dandies High Tea - Dance UK, Association of Dance of the African Diaspora and Youth Dance England

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Published 2014

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*Dance UK sits alongside other specialist support bodies that were created over the last 30 years and is in the process of pulling together a new collaborative model to support the sector. In 2011, Dance UK (DUK) lost its core funding from Arts Council England (ACE). As a result, DUK moved to obtain project funding support via ACE's Grants 4 the Arts Scheme (Dance UK).*

Dance UK also secured major support from Paul Hamlyn Foundation to set about a whole new business review to transform how three national dance organisations: Dance UK, Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD) and Youth Dance England (YDE), might work together to create a new entrepreneurial partnership working model to raise funds to support their activities. This review led to a decision to apply for a Catalyst (3) grant to develop capacity for the three organisations which was successful. The funds enabled Dance UK to appoint its first shared Head of Development & Strategy and a Fundraising Fellow (recruited as part of the Arts Philanthropy and Fundraising programme) for the three organisations. The organisations reflect the arc of activities to support UK dance – from one's earliest experiences as a child to being a professional dancer, choreographer, teacher, manager.

My appointment in early September 2014, is to pool the organisations' resources over the next two years, to enable them to operate efficiently, leveraging funds raised for the greatest possible benefit to the sector and raise at least £450,000 from private, non-ACE funds. Overall, the Catalyst project also aims to set a precedent for sustainable fundraising practice across the dance sector, by creating robust business models that encourage and support the diversification of income streams and professional approaches to fundraising.

## Objectives

The idea to mount such a fundraising event came through my remit to raise funds for the three organisations and also develop their capacity to fundraise in general. With this in mind, it was decided to hold a major, joint-fundraiser event: the **Sugar Dandies High Tea** on 6 April 2014 at the Royal Ballet School in Covent Garden. Although I had organised a number of successful fundraising events in the past, I had never attempted to produce one for three (dance) organisations at the same time! A critical step was to create a detailed strategy so the three boards were fully aware about how we would achieve our fundraising target of £40,000 (after expenses) from various activities – from ticket sales (which were kept at a reasonable price of £75 to encourage sales), to the auctions (both silent and live), to 'treats' (a tombola-like activity where everyone who donates £40 wins a prize such as restaurant vouchers for meals or theatre tickets or a product), to selling adverts for our High Tea Programme, to obtaining sponsorship.



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Each area had a specific target to reach and within the auction, each organisation would have the chance to raise funds via a specific 'project lot'. In this way, anyone attending could choose to specifically support an organisation's particular work. Apart from these specific lots and any designated donations, any other funds raised would be divided three-ways by the three organisations.

My other objective was to provide a way of profiling their work to a whole new group of individual supporters. These were ambitious objectives.

## Target audience

The target audience was someone with a passion for dance who had the capacity to purchase a £75 ticket and also spend at least £100 or more at the event. None of the organisations had ever attempted a fundraising event and thus, none had a 'ready-made' group of individuals to approach – a situation further exacerbated by the fact that they did not have a CRM system database with giving history by individuals. I decided to rely on the organisations' boards to assist with asking for peer-to-peer support. Personal contacts were the best place to start. My detailed strategy included information on how the boards could help in 'finding' contacts. I felt that with 23 board members across the three organisations, we would comfortably reach our anticipated target audience of 180 people.



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## Process

Although never done before, I felt intuitively that fundraising for more than one charity at the same time could be achieved with great success. Over the years I've worked in various development positions. I have encountered individuals with a passion for dance with the willingness to support the sector and donate to more than one organisation. Many of them followed my various jobs - proving the adage that people give to people (and to causes they feel passionate about).

The decision to use the Sugar Dandies (same-sex ballroom champions) came from their offer to host the event free of charge as a way of helping us to raise funds. The Sugar Dandies had been touring a tea dance model that had been extremely successful in attracting people and providing a fun-filled afternoon. I felt their programme was just the right 'tone' for a first-time fundraiser – focused on dance but with a chance to take part and watch performances. We augmented the programme by offering each organisation the chance to present a dance company/artist that best represented their organisation's artistic mission.

Having developed a detailed strategy for the event, I decided not to create a separate event committee. I felt it would be enough to work with the three boards to attract potential guests. The first surprise came about three months after meeting with the boards. Youth Dance England decided not to take part in the event and instead, focus on a cultivation evening around their Young Creatives performance taking place four days after the Tea Dance. Their departure meant Dance UK and ADAD would have to work extra hard to reach both the financial and attendance targets.

The second surprise arose when I discovered that the trustees really did not have a large pool of potential guests to invite! Among the 18 trustees, only about half a dozen had contacts who could attend the fundraiser. My lesson from this was no matter how many boards one might work with – it's vital to ALWAYS create a distinct event committee who will use their energy and contacts to provide the much needed focus on fundraising. We persevered with a great deal of work, exploitation of personal contacts and assistance from friends we managed to attract 130 guests. In fact, we realised on the day that the Royal Ballet School space could not have held many more without guests feeling very crowded!

My third surprise was the extent to which the organisations' wider group of stakeholders (ADAD artists and Dance UK members) rallied around to provide some of the most amazing prizes for our auctions and 'treats'. Social media was a god-send in helping us to put the SOS out to members and contacts. Once prizes were offered, we looked at ways to 'up-scale' them, such as combining tickets to performances with money can't buy opportunities – e.g. the chance to be a guest of one of the main dancers to go behind the scenes and watch the show from the wings of the Opera House. In the end, we secured seven fabulous 'money-can't-buy' live auction prizes and added two 'project lots'. The 'project lots' were simply opportunities for guests to donate at various levels to a selected project that represented each organisation's work. This was a very effective way to raise money for specific initiatives. Overall, the live auction alone raised nearly £20,000.

The generous donations of prizes also enabled us to offer 30 silent auction prizes. The silent auction ran throughout the afternoon and raised a further £8,000.

With regards to the auctions, because the actual event would be limited in terms of people attending, I built into the strategy, an online campaign to auction the prizes online which started three weeks prior to our actual event and was put out across our powerful social media networks. This was highly effective in raising bids PRIOR to the event and was a key reason why the auctions were so successful.

Our other fundraising devise was to offer of 'treats' and this was also very effective. Acquiring these prizes demanded a concentrated effort of cold-calling and literally walking the streets of London. But it paid off and brought in a further £2,160.

Going after advertising for our High Tea Programme also required a great deal of cold-calling. We made sure to treat each contact as a possible source for an advert, prize or treat and developed relationships with a whole new group of corporate supporters. And two businesses – Penhaglion’s London and Neil’s Yard Remedies provided us with items that we gave away to guests as gifts.

My final surprise was how a chance contact with a dance lover led to the event’s major sponsorship – in kind support from the Hispania Restaurant, London for the food. Their support enabled us to provide a sumptuous Spanish-themed spread at a fraction of what it would normally cost, thus enabling us to bring in more funds overall.

## **Outcomes**

The entire event, along with miscellaneous donations raised just over £40,500 which exceeded our original target. Dance UK and ADAD agreed a split of 60/40 due to the number of people brought in by Dance UK contacts but each organisation received 100% of donations achieved for their particular ‘project lots’ – for ADAD, its Trailblazers Programme and for Dance UK, its Dancers’ Health Programme. Having secured funds for these projects has been very helpful for further fundraising as this money can be allocated as confirmed funds for applications for these particular projects.

The joint fundraiser was also successful in raising the profile and introducing individuals to each organisation’s work. Many of those bidding on the ‘project lots’ were new to each organisation. People also enjoyed the variety of performances (which included both Dance UK member artists/companies: Valentino Zucchetti (from The Royal Ballet) and Rambert, and ADAD artists: jazz tapper Annette Walker and contemporary dancer Sean Graham. Best of all, alongside the Sugar Dandies, these artists were given the chance to perform to a whole new audience.

Significantly, the High Tea fundraiser provided each member of the team a chance to gain new skills and learn about running such an event. Although a very steep learning curve and very hard work, the post-event debrief revealed that all had enjoyed the experience.

We are already being asked about the next Tea Dance and this time, will ensure our sister organisation, Youth Dance England is also involved.

## **Key points for effective practice**

Despite having produced a number of major fundraising events over the years, there were still many surprise moments – the biggest was just how easy it was to ‘sell’ the message that two dance organisations were fundraising jointly at the same event. No one attending seemed fazed by this.

I am also convinced to never proceed with another event without a dedicated events/development team of senior volunteers to rely on for help in bringing in guests and prizes. Such a group is also a very useful as a sounding board for ideas.

It is also vital to set out a detailed strategy with clear aims and objectives and not be too ambitious if it's a first time fundraiser. Sometimes it is enough to just aim to widen one's profile to a whole new group of potential donors as it is to raise funds. Both are important steps in building development potential for an organisation. And just as significant is the need to build in time for proper follow up. Follow up is often neglected but is the best way to nurture over the long term, the relationships created by an event.

Make sure all venue arrangements are set out in writing and agreed by all parties. Just a word of warning – even with such agreements, things can go awry but at least you are protected and if the venue really lets you down, you can re-negotiate any payments due as per the contract.

Very detailed briefs are also important so that each person can take part and have a role. Briefs should also be created for any volunteers who may be coming in just for the actual event. If possible, take the staff team to the space for a walk-about prior to the actual event, and in any case, build in time for this in the preparation time. My biggest regret was not having enough thinking time to allocate all of the tasks for my novice team (preparation was not helped by the fact that I was also working on the consortium's NPO bid!). But in the end, the team pulled together spectacularly on the day.

Build in time after the event for a proper de-brief that celebrates the success and acknowledges what went well as well as examines what can be improved upon. This is the best way to build on the knowledge for any future events.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Fundraising events take a great deal of time to plan and implement and can take over if not managed effectively. Allow plenty of time, set out a detailed strategy and create a Gantt chart to show how different tasks will be undertaken within a given time frame.

I suggest that an organisation not try to undertake a major fundraiser unless it has a dedicated member of staff (or even better, a staff team) to ensure work progresses as needed. If such a person is not on hand, then it is wise to bring in freelance assistance. Even with an in-house team, it may be necessary to bring in additional people. Many universities look for placement opportunities for students and many students are keen to learn about event management so advertise for interns as you can never have enough hands on deck. Additionally, build in roles for volunteers.

Finally, although time-consuming, fundraising events are highly effective in building new audiences for your organisation's work whilst at the same time, bringing in much needed funds. This event proved that people will give to more than one organisation at the same time and I recommend arts organisations consider more joined-up opportunities to raise funds. Even with the exhaustion of mounting such a major event, it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience and has brought the organisations together more closely. It's a win-win situation.