

Guide

Getting your donor cultivation event right

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As with the majority of fundraising, organising events involves a lot of common sense. As a fundraiser starting out in a small organisation I learnt a lot from trial and error before the common sense kicked in, so a little reminder of key points should not be underestimated.

What is the point?

You may have a beautiful venue or a fantastic host, but first and foremost you need to establish **why** you're doing this event. What does the organisation hope to achieve by spending all that hard-raised money? This question influences everything else from guest list, host, activities, style, and messaging. It is well worth spending time on your objectives and getting buy-in from your team, management and Board before you go ahead. Your objectives will also add valuable perspective later when you're arguing about flower arrangements; will roses help you achieve X more than lilies? Check your objectives and move on.

Who's in the room?

Your guest list must be driven by your objectives, and ideally keep the cultivation and stewardship events separate. It's ok for an event to be a celebration of a success, include your stakeholders and existing donors and **thank** them for their part in it. Events thanking existing supporters are essential, but as the fundraiser, don't let the organisation get carried away; you need to entice new donors too.

If you're inviting new prospects, consider having a few of your close supporters in the room. These need to be people you can share your objectives with and who can be an advocate for your organisation.

What are you saying?

Messaging needs to reflect the objectives and be targeted to the people the room. If you've decided to mix prospects with existing supporters your messaging needs to be spot on - don't forget to thank the donors! Telling people you need their support whilst not acknowledging those giving in the room can create awkwardness and is a wasted opportunity to make your donors feel great.

Give direction in your messaging. How can these people help you, are you asking them to bid now, hand a business card to the Development Director, or are they waiting for your call next week? If it's the latter, make sure you follow up. Don't expect people to proactively respond to flyers around the room or an inspirational speech if you haven't asked them for something specific, whether that's money on the night, a pledge or just a show of interest. **You** are responsible for moving them into action.

Here is your host...

Is the host someone interesting or important enough for your guests to care about coming? Remember that as a cultural organisation you have access to some incredibly interesting people. Use them well. Use a host with pulling power; this could be members of your Board inviting their peers. Give your Board a role, include them in the briefing, the messaging and the objectives and they will be engaged. Rather than open invitations to all events, invite specific Board members for different cultivation events depending on their skills, networks or passions. It's a great way to involve them with fundraising. Seeing you in action helps the Board understand the need and will make them feel more comfortable involving their contacts in the future.

Why are you so special?

Remember what makes your organisation unique and use it. Whether it's a gala, a small reception or networking event, you have access to artists and/or unique spaces. If your guests are more accustomed to dreary dinners and business buffets you have an amazing opportunity to be the talk of the town and make people want to keep coming back for more.

Big or small

I now work as a fundraiser in a Development team of 15 with 3 members dedicated to events, but these pointers are just as relevant if you're a lone fundraiser or part of very small team. If anything they let you utilise your limited resource to best effect.

You need as many fundraisers in the room as you can, so if you are a small team assign an event manager who can look after the practicalities during the event. This may mean a **full and in-depth** handover of responsibility to a trusted colleague. You cannot expect to concentrate on a conversation about your donor's inspiration in life if you're worrying about whether the canapés are being served quickly enough. If you do have to be the event manager, you need to brief the staff and Board members in the room beforehand and hound them all for individual feedback before they're allowed to leave. Also ensure you have specific actions to be able to follow up with everyone.

Follow up

You invited them, now you need to follow up. It may be to thank them for coming and reiterate how their support has helped. It may be a request to meet them and talk about their support. It may be an offer to help them get tickets, send a review of that play you recommended or even to ask for the recipe of that cake they mentioned. What was the point of your event and how can you follow up with each individual afterwards to help you achieve that? Coming in late and washing dozens of champagne flutes may feel essential the next day, but keep your eye on the objectives and make sure all your hard work wasn't for nothing.

Example event timeline for Cultivation or Stewardship Event	
4-6 months before	Need for event identified and opportunity found. Define objectives.
3 months before	Save the date sent. Hold date with key staff, Board members and stakeholders.
3 months before	Aim to send invitations out – Remember: guest lists always takes longer to finalise than planned.
2 months before	Final invitations sent out.
1 month before	RSVP deadline.
2 weeks before	Joining instructions to guests.
1 week before	Suggested speech notes to host. Briefing notes to team and Board.
Event	Pre-event briefing for staff and Board on the day. Event manager runs event, fundraisers focus on the guests.
Post event	Follow up.

About CultureHive

This guide was produced as part of CultureHive, a free knowledge hub where you can discover and share best practice in cultural marketing and fundraising. Visit culturehive.co.uk for more great resources.