

Tips for Organizing A Profitable Inaugural Event

When you don't have a 20-year track record of success backing your event, planning can be intimidating. What goes into executing a successful first-time event? Laurie Earp, founder and principal of Earp Events & Fundraising, offers five tips:

1. **Focus on sponsorships:** "This is core to any first-time event," says Earp. "Eighty percent of the money you raise will come from sponsorships, so you should focus the largest part of your energy on those. Spend time with your key stakeholders and senior staff in advance making a solid targeted sponsorship list. Review invitations you've personally received to get to know the market. Figure out what other organizations' sponsorship levels are to provide guidelines for yours. And don't limit yourself. It doesn't cost you anything to offer more, higher sponsorship levels. If you don't ask, you won't get."
2. **Don't fear cannibalizing:** Your initiatives should support each other. Major donor development officers should not be fearful of events cannibalizing other efforts. Use your new event to leverage other asks.
3. **Choose the right speaker:** "If you can get a well-known personality, that may be good, but it's not necessary," notes Earp. "Celebrities are nice, but it's the organization that drives the event and motivates people to be there. Someone from the community can be just as motivating, if she is passionate about your cause. She should be brief and to the point, as well as enthusiastic — able to motivate others through her passion."
4. **Fund a need:** Earp advises, "Don't be afraid to make an ask. You want to stretch your donors. Focus on the fund-a-need with thoughtful levels and impacts of giving; be sure to have arranged someone who's going to give a sizable first gift at the event. Then, invest in a visual 'thermometer' to show progress and excite and engage attendees."
5. **Stay true to the organization:** "From beginning to end, the event should represent your organization and mission," says Earp. "This applies to all the details. For example, don't spend a lot of money on floral centerpieces; if you're funding education, display stacks of books. Stay true to who your organization is. I recently worked with Friends of Oakland Animal Services to create their 'Raise the Woof' inaugural event. Everything — from the title, to the theme, to images, to the vegan menu — represented animals and was in line with their mission. We were even able to bring animals to the event, which everyone loved. Whatever your focus, you should transform the space so it speaks wholeheartedly of the organization — and make it fun!"

Source: Laurie Earp, Founder and Principal, Earp Events & Fundraising, Oakland, CA. Phone (510) 839-3100 E-mail: laurie@earpevents.com. Website: www.earpevents.com

Pair Your Grand Opening With a Gala

By Kerry Nenn

When it was time to invite the public into the new History Museum on the Square (Springfield, MO), event planners developed a unique strategy. Krista Adams, director of development, explains, "Our museum features one gallery dedicated to Route 66, so we planned our grand opening to coincide with the local Birthplace of Route 66 Festival. We then held a gala eight weeks later. This gave us breathing room to get our legs underneath us for day-to-day operations before adding an event."

Museum staff used the opening to promote the upcoming gala, which honored all donors who had named areas within the museum. "We decided the best way to thank our supporters was to have a gala that honored them as one of the first events at the museum," says Adams. "This also allowed us to attract friends and family of donors to the event, who wanted to see the donors honored."

Staff also used the grand opening to promote museum memberships. "As people were leaving, we let them know that if they enjoyed their visit, they could upgrade to an annual membership. We would apply today's \$16 ticket price toward the annual \$40 membership. This was a very good strategy, because people like the option of trying things out before buying a membership, and they view it as a \$16 discount on the price of membership."

The follow-up gala included a cocktail hour with free roaming of the museum, seated dinner, live auction, live music and donor recognition. The recognition included the establishment of an annual award, given to an individual, family or corporation making significant contributions to the museum.

The event sold out, netting \$50,000. Sponsorships and general donations made up much of this revenue, including donations from those who couldn't attend the event. Adams advises, "It worked great to open during the Route 66 Festival. We had a strong built-in audience who would be interested in one of our galleries. If you can, pair your opening with another event that will be bringing people to the area. This helps get the word out. We opened in August, and by January, we already had visitors from 25 different countries."

"It also helped to host a series of dry runs before our grand opening and newly established annual gala," notes Adams. "We had a day when staff and volunteers could invite their friends and family to tour the museum. We did some focus groups with kids to see how field trips would go. And we invited local dignitaries to experience the museum. This allowed us to discover any bottlenecks to visitor flow and try things out before the museum was open to the public. I highly recommend getting as many people as you can through the space before opening, to work out any issues before your grand event."

Source: Krista Adams, Director of Development, History Museum on the Square, Springfield, MO. Phone (417) 831-1976. E-mail: krista@historymuseumonthesquare.org. Website: <https://historymuseumonthesquare.org/>