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NO MASQUERADE

A revealing look at Southwest Florida's fundraising affairs and how the pros make them succeed.

By Lori Johnston / Photograph by Erik Kellar



SOUTHWEST FLORIDA KNOWS HOW TO PARTY.

The social calendars of the rich and generous are packed with hundreds of charity balls that include everything from golf outings, wine and food festivals, beach bashes, benefit concerts and arts outings to bachelor auctions, happy hours, girls nights out, talent shows, holiday breakfasts and teas, and lecture series.

It's more than a chance to rub elbows with celebrities or dress up in glamorous gowns or themed attire—pirates, cowboys and *Great Gatsby* characters to name a few. There is a sincere desire among our region's numerous affluent residents to give to worthy causes.

"The individuals who have moved to Naples, who are some of the luckiest of Americans, they've also brought with them a philanthropic spirit that is hard to match across America," says Bob Clifford, who with wife Joan are 2012 chairs of the Naples Winter Wine Festival, the region's most successful and high-profile event.

At the same time, the overwhelming number of events—many of which are scheduled on the same weekends—cause businesses and attendees to wonder whether the requests for donations will ever end. As more charitable events debut each year, it's becoming tougher to earn a coveted spot on the calendars of those with deep pockets who are being more careful about spending. Some nonprofits recognize they need to sell businesses on the payoff of being sponsors and lean hard on relationships with folks connected to the organization.

"The idea that people believe you can cold call on some kind of business and say, 'Hey, do you

want to sponsor us?' That's kind of an urban legend," says Rebecca McGuire, executive director of Children's Home Society of Florida's Southwest Division.

SPENDING MONEY TO MAKE MONEY

THE STANDARD OF MANY NONPROFITS, FROM GUIDE-Star, a research firm that tracks data about nonprofits, is that for every dollar organizations spend on an event, it needs to raise \$3, McGuire says.

"That's getting harder to do, unless you get strong sponsorships and businesses who repeatedly step up to the plate and put you into their budget," she says. She added that her group's Fore the Children Charity Golf Invitational this year brought in an estimated \$2 for every dollar spent, netting a profit of \$12,900.

Nationally, the rates decline into negative figures, according to one group. Charities spent \$1.33 to raise \$1 in special events contributions, according to 2007 analysis of IRS data by Charity Navigator (the most recent year it reported), an organization that evaluates charities.

The biggest costs tend to be the venue, food and labor (see sidebar). "You always try to make as good of a deal as you can and try to get some part of it to be underwritten in making the place or venue an underwriter or sponsor," McGuire says.

Coming up with budgets can be a struggle for gala committees and organizations. A critical part of event planning is return on investment for expenses, says PJ Fuerstman Meyer,

owner of P'zazz, an entertainment and event production company with offices in Naples and New York.

AHOY, BUCKOS

Richard and Liz Flury, and Hank and Julie Franzen at a past Yabba Island Pirate Ball.



SHIRAZO PHOTOGRAPHY

“People who oversee corporate contributions look at these events much like you might look at bed bugs. You can control them to some extent, but they’ll never go away.”

A major component to creating a profitable event is setting the ticket price. Those often start out at \$100 per person for charitable galas in the region and can reach \$20,000, for example, to reserve seats for four at a vintner dinner in a private home and table on auction day for the 2012 Naples Winter Wine Festival. Although, the higher the ticket prices are, the more costs are offset. Event planners such as Ed Russo, owner of Fort Myers-based Planned Perfection, notes that he’s seen some organizations drop ticket prices in recent years to attract attendees.

Budgets are approached in different ways. Some groups have strict parameters, noted in their bylaws, such as spending up to 10 cents on the dollar for entertainment. A celebrity appearance can generate more press and more people, but it could send the budget soaring, unless the athlete, actor, author, chef or socialite grants a discount on their fee or attends pro bono. Celebrities tend to be more flexible in their pricing when they have a personal relationship with the organization, which was the case when pro-basketball legend Magic Johnson lowered his appearance fee to attend last year’s Big Brothers Big Sisters fundraiser in Naples.

Offering unique experiences can pay off for a charitable event, especially if you look at the success of the Naples Winter Wine Festival, which Clifford says doesn’t operate under GuideStar’s 3:1 ratio. “I’ve never once been told by our staff or anyone on the board on which I serve that there’s this formula, here’s how you need to do it,” Clifford says. But he adds: “We deliberately run the budget to where we try to raise funds, we try to be prudent and we try to (have a) zero deficit budget.”

THINK BEFORE YOU GIVE

BUSINESSES TEND TO SEEK SOME TYPE OF PAYOFF, whether in the form of name recognition, meeting bigwigs on the golf course or dance floor, or showing employees and clients that the company is interested in causes important to them. The conflict that businesses face is that these appeals for support often are rooted in the individual executive instead of a business purpose, says Curt Weeden, author of the book *Smart Giving is Good Business* and president of consulting firm Business & Nonprofit Strategies, based in Mount Pleasant, S.C.

“You’re out eating dried chicken and bad wine at an event that really doesn’t have anything to do with you,” he says. Some businesses participate in events that are so removed from their objectives that it begs for trouble, especially if they

BY THE NUMBERS

A peek at the 2011 budget for an annual charitable ball held by a national nonprofit organization with a Southwest Florida office:

Expenses	
Facility rental	\$13,026.45
Entertainment	\$2,350
Printing	\$836.50
Miscellaneous	\$518.30
Total	\$16,731.25
Income	
Ticket sales	\$2,825
Sponsorships	\$13,000
Drawing	\$1,200
Donations	\$46,650
Silent auction	\$9,395
Live auction	\$6,600
Total	\$79,670

Net profit \$62,938.75

are answering to shareholders. The company might be questioned about a decision to spend \$5,000, for example, on a sponsorship or table at a charitable event when those funds could be kept inside the company or passed along to shareholders, he says.

“For the most part, people who are charged with overseeing corporate contributions and special-event funding on behalf of these companies really look at these events much like you might look at bed bugs,” Weeden says. “You can control them to some extent, but they’ll never go away.”

When companies agree to sponsor (often ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000, and sometimes higher) or donate products or services, businesses, like attendees, want to be

WHAT'S OUT	WHAT'S IN
Chicken	Surf and turf
Multiple events	One signature fundraiser
Silent auctions	Drawings
Logo-bearing keychains in gift bags	Gift cards in gift bags
Tropical theme	Safari theme
Centerpieces	Donation baskets

connected to buzz-worthy events that are pulled off in a professional manner. That's how some organizations rationalize the thousands of dollars they spend on entertainment, food, decorations and publicity.

"It's no secret that developing support from corporate and local businesses is vitally important for success [of an event], but I don't think it's always easily accomplished," says Jake Stevens, senior vice president/business banking, American Momentum Bank, and chairman of the fundraising and advisory board for Children's Home Society. "In a contracting economy and reduced available resources, businesses are increasingly particular and more selective in their support."

It has become difficult for organizations to sustain the same level of funding for special events the past couple of years, says Mark W. Shamley, the Orlando-based president and CEO of the Association of Corporate Contribution Professionals, a trade group of more than 150 executives who field charitable requests for major corporations. Companies are saying,

"If it's not aligned with our business and social focus, it's not a priority anymore."

The additional challenge that Southwest Florida faces is that there aren't many large corporations, Weeden says. "Let's face it, in Naples and the surrounding area, you've got a lot of money, but it isn't directly tied with active corporations. It's executives who have retired there or have peripheral involvement."

In planning for the high-profile Naples Winter Wine Festival, Clifford says he's been surprised that some companies don't expect anything. One company, for example, has donated an elaborate experience that will cost them tens of thousands of dollars. "They said, we've studied your organization for years and we want to ... help you do the continuing things that you're doing for these children," Clifford says. "They want nothing back. They didn't ask me for tickets. They didn't ask me for name identification somewhere. How good is that?"

OUT WITH SAME OLD, SAME OLD

WINE FESTIVAL SUPPORTERS ARE SEEKING ONE-of-a-kind experiences more than getting their photos taken with celebrities. "Unless you're calling Wolfgang Puck a celebrity, which is fair," Clifford says. "They're more interested in having the unique experience of a meal cooked by him in a limited venue."

Clifford adds that he's "begging all the time" in talking to Fortune 500 companies and other potential donors to develop auction lots featuring unique experiences that even the richest people in the world would have a difficult time pulling together on a whim.

AT A GLANCE: 5 SOUTHWEST FLORIDA FUNDRAISERS

Charity	Event*	Gross Receipts	Contributions	Gross Revenue	Expenses	Net Income
Neighborhood Health Clinic	Block Party	\$541,439	\$25,045	\$566,481	\$2,706	\$483,775
Guadalupe Center of Immokalee	Taste of Spain	\$397,629	\$0	\$397,629	\$83,027	\$314,602
Humane Society Naples	Gala	\$199,920	\$48,430	\$151,490	\$77,394	\$170,956
Boys & Girls Club of Collier County	Golf-A-Thon	\$182,328	\$0	\$182,328	\$16,609	\$165,718
Youth Haven	Annual event	\$148,000	\$0	\$148,000	\$90,000	\$58,000

*IN 2011
RESEARCH BY CHARITY NAVIGATOR, AN INDEPENDENT CHARITY EVALUATOR, BASED ON IRS FORM 990 DATA; DATA WAS CONFIRMED BY THE ORGANIZATIONS. SOME OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA'S EVENTS DID NOT APPEAR HERE BECAUSE THEY WERE NOT TRACKED BY CHARITY NAVIGATOR.

DO'S AND DON'TS OF CHARITABLE EVENTS

Do plan in advance.

Timing is everything, so nonprofits should approach companies before they set their budget for the next year. Weeden suggests that businesses have a fixed annual funding plan for events and agree that other parts of the budget are off limits. Advance planning also is important for planning the venue, catering, entertainment and sending out "save the date" announcements, says Russo.

Don't give long speeches.

"People want to know the mission and see what the money is going to," McGuire says, but guests are there to enjoy the gala without having to hear rambling speeches. Her event has replaced long videos and client testimonials with a 5-minute video. "When the audience is louder than you are, and you're trying to do a program, you know that you've lost them."

Do consider the timing.

The majority of events occur when snowbirds cause the region's population to swell during the winter, but some events are taking chances by trying to stand out in other months. The 2012 "Art in Bloom" event will be held in early May. "Everything is so intense from November to March, and there are so many fundraising wonderful charitable organizations, that I felt that we don't need to have our event during that time period," Idelson says.

Don't say "no" to a donor.

Nonprofits should be willing to do anything to make the event enjoyable and memorable for the donor, McGuire says, from making it easy to get tickets to check-in to redeem gift certificates won in an auction or drawing.

Do factor in the businesses benefits.

Companies should consider how participating in a walkathon or another type of charitable event can boost employee morale, promote your brand and build opportunities to grow clients, Weeden says.

Other unique events include a skydive fundraiser for Project Help; the weiner dog derby to support local animal welfare organizations; bowling with Minnesota Twins players to raise money for Lee Memorial Health System's Regional Cancer Center; the Land Sea Air event, which had guests arriving via seaplane, horse-drawn carriage, helicopter, antique cars and other methods for a Community Cooperative Ministries fundraiser; and Stand-up Paddleboard Luau Races to benefit Special Olympics Collier County.

The first-ever Art In Bloom gala in Fort Myers, to benefit the Bob Rauschenberg Center for Living, an HIV/AIDS service provider in Southwest Florida, featured floral arrangements inspired by works of art. Russo, who came up with the event idea, says having 132 attendees was successful for planning the March party in a short time period. But some of his nonprofit clients shoot for crowds of 300 to 400 people to have a financially successful event.

Although costs such as the food, auctioneer, entertainment and photography all were donated, Art in Bloom organizer Linda Idelson says some businesses appeared "exhausted" after a season's full of events. "I think that's why I didn't get as large as donations from some of the businesses as I would have liked."

It's common to see company names on signs, T-shirts, ads and programs. Fuerstman Meyer is offering more exposure for business sponsors, such as shining their names on the building and using creative signage tied to the theme of the event. If there's a red carpet involved, the company names can

appear on sponsorship boards in all photos.

To create must-attend events, P'zazz has incorporated trends such as interactive experiences. For example, Fuerstman Meyer seeks to surprise guests from the moment they grab a cocktail or hors d'oeuvre, replacing servers in black and white with costumed showgirls and sea nymphs wearing large tables as their skirts. For an event at Shula's, when guests reached into a sombrero filled with chips, the sombrero suddenly rose up above the table, revealing the head of an actor who bantered with guests, saying, "Señora, please don't eat my chips."

"People have gone to so many of these events for so many years, they want to be surprised and delighted," she says.

For her first year planning the fifth annual Wishmaker's Ball, Lesley Colantonio overhauled the fundraiser for the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Southern Florida's West Coast Office. She ditched the overused Dancing with the Stars theme and created a ball featuring longtime Naples entertainer Jimmy Keyes.

"I was afraid that people would be like, 'Oh, we've seen him.' But a lot of people hadn't, which was really good," says Colantonio, senior special events coordinator.

She also moved the location from Estero's Hyatt Coconut Point Resort & Spa toward Naples, to the Strand Country Club, seeking to appeal to Collier County residents. Attendance has dropped over the years, with 92 people in this year's crowd, and Colantonio is shooting for 200 attendees in the future. "We'd almost like to get it to the point where it's like, 'Oh sorry, we're sold out,'" she says. **gB**