

Virtual Fundraising Events

A Resource Guide for Best Practices

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Ann Plans, a Minnesota-based expert in fundraising events, has created this resource guide to help nonprofit organizations pivot and experience success in the virtual event space.

Welcome to Our Resource Guide!

This resource guide is designed to help nonprofit organizations reimagine in-person fundraising events in the virtual space. As the Ann Plans team helps organizations navigate this significant shift, we are focused on best practices for creating inspiring programs and successful giving strategies that translate well to people watching and participating online.

When COVID-19 first began impacting the ability to hold in-person events, “virtual events” quickly became part of everyday vocabulary. In simple terms, a virtual event can be defined as using today’s technologies to bring an event to “guests” via the internet.

Many nonprofit organizations needed to go online with their fundraising events very quickly with not a lot of time for transitioning to a virtual format. As with anything new, many questions and concerns surfaced immediately about how best to pivot into virtual territory. At the same time, new insights on best practices and creative ideas have quickly emerged and will continue to evolve as we collect more data, refine best practices, and get smarter together.

Our team has been encouraged by how well virtual fundraising events are performing overall both locally and nationally. While some organizations have fallen short of their anticipated fundraising, many have met and even exceeded revenue goals.

We hope you find the content in this guide to be both practical and inspiring.



Ann Nelson
Senior Event Planner

Ann Plans has been celebrating and serving with the nonprofit community since 2007. An expert in fundraising events, we partner with organizations in creating amazing events that inspire generosity. Our team specializes in supporting our clients’ missions through purposeful storytelling and strategies that grow attendance, increase revenue, and cultivate supporters.

Eight Best Practices Key to Virtual Success

Many elements of an in-person event translate well to the virtual space, but it is critical to view a virtual event through a different lens now that guests are participating online rather than from an event venue. These eight best practices will help ensure virtual success by engaging and inspiring your viewers:

- 1. Keep the program short.** A 30-minute program will serve most organizations better than one that runs 45-60 minutes.
- 2. Focus on making the program** mission-filled, fun and entertaining.
- 3. Kick off the program** with a heartfelt welcome thanking people for attending, sharing mission, and speaking to why this virtual gathering and financial support are so important.
- 4. Weave messaging throughout** the program inviting and instructing people on how to donate.
- 5. Leverage pre-committed gifts** and a matching gift component to inspire giving.
- 6. Commit to an extensive pre-event** and post-event marketing campaign to maximize engagement and giving.
- 7. Carefully select an online giving platform** that has the features that will best support your virtual event.
- 8. Team up with a trusted video producer** or audiovisual company to edit and manage the technical production of your event.

Benefits to Going Virtual

Reimagining fundraising events in a virtual format has become a necessity rather than a choice for many organizations. While this new format has presented a steep learning curve for nonprofits and their supporters, there are benefits that are being realized:

- Participating in a virtual event is a **short time commitment** for your supporters compared to attending an in-person event.
- The sky's the limit in terms of how many people can take part. There is the opportunity to **broaden your audience** and gain many new supporters.
- Going virtual allows you to turn your event into a **multi-day giving campaign** with the opportunity for people to donate online in the days leading up to the event, during the event, and in the days following.
- You can choose to **host your virtual event any time** and day of the week without the constraints of venue availability.
- By making the link to your virtual event available after your program premieres, people who are not available on "event day" **can still experience the program** and participate financially.
- Virtual events are **less expensive to produce** than in-person events.

Should We Pre-record or Go Live?

A virtual event can be streamed online as a pre-recorded show or as a live production. When fundraising events first started pivoting to virtual, most were produced as pre-recorded programs since this is the safest option in terms of production control. As organizations are getting more comfortable with virtual events, more events are going live.

Pre-recorded. This involves filming and editing the entire program ahead of time and then uploading it online for viewing at the scheduled time. Although the event won't be "live" or directed in real time, the premiere of your event can still be exciting and inspiring.

- A pre-recorded program **provides more control** over length and content.
- There is **less chance of technical difficulties** because everything has been filmed and edited together in advance.
- A pre-recorded event provides **fewer opportunities for viewer interaction**, although a chat feature can still be utilized to invite viewer comments. For a chat feature, it is important to have staff assigned to respond to comments.

Live. This is similar to a live television newscast where the main video feed is going directly from a studio (or other locations) to online in real time.

- Like in-person events, virtual fundraising events **include pre-recorded video elements** such as client stories.
- The emcee or auctioneer has the opportunity to **highlight current bidding** on auction packages and **update progress on the fundraising goal** to help inspire additional bidding and donations.
- Since there is a higher chance of technology glitches and speakers not executing remarks well, you will need **extra pre-event preparation and rehearsals** to ensure a smooth broadcast.

How do we produce pre-recorded videos during social distancing?

Here are ways impactful video content can still be created during times when videos are not able to be filmed in some of the traditional ways:

- Speakers can be provided with **guidelines for filming from home** using a phone or tablet.
- Many video production companies **have implemented social distancing practices** for filming videos safely. This is an option in instances where those being filmed are comfortable interacting with a small video team of one or more persons.
- Consider using video footage you already **have in your archives** to create a new video or reuse a powerful video that has been previously shown.

How will our program be viewed online?

Determine with your technical team how the event will be broadcast or streamed online. Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom are among the platforms being used for streaming virtual events. In many instances, the event is available for viewing on more than one platform.

Creating a Program that Captivates and Inspires

Given the challenges of keeping a captive audience when people are tuning in from home, it is extra important that your program is short, mission-filled, inspiring, and fun. Here are some tips for knocking it out of the park with your virtual program:

- ✓ **Kick off the program** with a message of gratitude and why this gathering is important.
- ✓ **Select an emcee** or host who is passionate about your cause. A host who is comfortable on camera, such as a media personality or actor, can add to the seamlessness of your program and make your viewers comfortable.
- ✓ **Focus on storytelling.** The stories of how your organization is making a difference in the lives of individuals and the community are what will inspire people to give.
- ✓ **Share how your organization** has adapted and made changes in response to COVID-19.
- ✓ **Keep the pace fast moving** with several short segments. For example, if your CEO typically speaks for 5-7 minutes at your in-person event, make that a 2 minute extremely heartfelt message. If your videos featuring client stories usually run 5 minutes, aim for 3 minutes.
- ✓ **Make it easy for people to give.** Clearly communicate throughout the program how people can make their donation. If your program includes a silent and/or live auction, provide instructions on how to bid.
- ✓ **Partner with a professional auctioneer** to help generate excitement about your auction items and inspire people to give generously. Your auctioneer can facilitate your strategies for leveraging pre-committed leadership gifts and matching gifts.
- ✓ **Be sure to include a pre-event** “reception” or “pre-show” for your virtual event of 15-30 minutes. This pre-show time provides additional messaging opportunities and helps ensure that people are logged on by the start of your main program.
- ✓ **The pre-show programming** can include a countdown clock, slides thanking sponsors, promotion of auction packages, mission-focused photos, short video clips of client testimonials, and clever “thank you for joining us” messages.

Tips for Maximizing Your Marketing Plan

When creating your marketing plan, think about your virtual event as a hybrid between an in-person event and a several-day online giving campaign. Pre-event marketing is crucial to generating excitement and driving participation. Post-event communication is important in expressing gratitude, sharing results, and inviting the participation of those who haven't yet contributed.

Pre-Event Marketing Tips:

- 1. Make sure your sponsors** and major donors are the first to know about your switch to a virtual event.
- 2. Create an easy-to-find landing page** on your website with clear information on how to register, donate, participate in the auction and view the program.
- 3. Make the registration process as easy as possible!** While we don't recommend charging a ticket price for guests to attend your virtual event, it is important to encourage people to register so they can receive pre-event updates.
- 4. Promote the event on social media** including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. Post regularly and more often in the week leading up to the event.
- 5. Include short videos** in your pre-event marketing from individuals such as your emcee, CEO, and event chair to generate interest.
- 6. Expand your mailing** and email communication lists to be more inclusive than you would if this was a ticketed in-person event.
- 7. Be clever with your social media.** This can include taking your audience behind-the-scenes of the virtual event preparation with photos of virtual committee meetings, video shoots, rehearsals, and the locations from where you will be broadcasting.
- 8. Send reminder emails** and text messages with the link to participate two to three times within the 24 hours before your event.

Post-Event Marketing Tips:

- 1. Send a thank you text message** and email to registered guests immediately following the event including a thank you, the donation link, and reminder of the auction closing time.
- 2. Post the video of your virtual event** on your website, YouTube and Facebook page to maximize the number of people who view the program and may be inspired to give.
- 3. Search for your event hashtag** on all social media platforms and comment on the posts that were made about your event including a "thank you for joining us."
- 4. Share post-event results** on social media platforms and consider including a thank you video.

Creating Community Virtually

While your guests will not be socializing together in the same room, there are ways to create community virtually and provide a fun and engaging event experience:

- Encourage individuals who would typically host a table of guests at your in-person event to **host a “virtual table”** by inviting friends and colleagues to register and take part in the virtual event.
- **Offer a VIP event experience** option that can be purchased in advance with fun perks. These perks can include a special “viewing” basket that is delivered before the event and access to a virtual happy hour with your CEO and/or a celebrity.
- Feature one or two **signature cocktail recipes** from a local mixologist on your website. Your pre-show programming can include a quick video clip of the mixologist shaking up the cocktails.
- Promote **Facebook watch parties** as a way for your viewers to engage their larger network of friends.
- Make sure your streaming platform has a **“chat” option to facilitate fun interaction** and dialogue amongst your viewers. Assign one or more staff members to acknowledge comments, share the donation link, and “chat up” the auction packages.
- Invite guests to dress as if they are attending the event in person. Encourage people to **post photos on social media** using the event hashtag.
- If available through your online bidding platform, consider using the feature that **displays donor names** as donations are made. This publicly acknowledges each supporter and inspires others to participate. Make sure there is the option for people to remain anonymous.

Positioning Your Online Auction for Success

Silent and live auctions will look different over the next several months due to the economic impact of COVID-19. For the foreseeable future, all auctions will be online. With restaurants, theaters, sports teams, and other businesses that support our nonprofits largely on pause, it is challenging to make these traditional requests right now.

Online auctions have been around for several years, but for many organizations this is a new way of promoting and selling items. Best practices for online auctions include:

- ✓ **High quality photos** of items are extra important when taking an auction online.
- ✓ Make sure your descriptions **cover all of the key selling features** and restrictions, and use language that positions your packages as irresistible.
- ✓ Open your online auction **4-7 days before the virtual event**, and close the auction 30-60 minutes after your event ends.
- ✓ For experiences such as sporting events and vacation packages, work with the donor to **have maximum flexibility** as to when the package can be redeemed to allow for the uncertainty of when such activities will resume.
- ✓ Make it crystal clear how and when winning bidders can expect to claim or receive their winnings. **Be flexible in making it as easy as possible** for these transfers to take place.
- ✓ Communicate clearly that items larger than a gift card or certificate **cannot be mailed or shipped**.

Think creatively about auction item procurement:

Have fun thinking outside the box in identifying auction packages that make sense to curate during this time of uncertainty:

- Invite supporters of your organization to make an auction donation **and support local businesses** at the same time by purchasing gift cards or putting together themed baskets featuring products from local businesses.
- Consider adding virtual experiences such as **a virtual wine tasting class** with a sommelier, book club evening with a best-selling author, a cooking class, or happy hour with a celebrity.
- **Identify additional recognition opportunities** for your auction donors to help lift them up during this challenging economic time.

Can we be successful with a live auction in a virtual format?

Live auctions can be a good source of revenue and add an element of fun. That said, attempting a live auction virtually is not the right strategy for every organization. If your live auctions perform well at in-person events and you have strong auction packages for your virtual event, adding this element make sense. Here are tips for pivoting a live auction into a “not so live” format:

- Instead of referring to these as “live” auction packages, shift the language to “featured” or “premier” packages.
- Keep the number of packages small to keep your virtual program moving along. For many events, **3-5 exciting featured or premier auction packages** is the right number.
- **Promote these featured packages** prior to your event through your online auction, social media, and other communications going out to your supporters.
- Open bidding online **4-7 days before your virtual event**, and leave the bidding open for 30-60 minutes after the event to allow for final bidding activity.
- While strong auction packages **can provide a good source of revenue**, be prepared that these packages are unlikely to raise as much money as they would at an in-person event.
- Dedicate pre-work to **identifying key supporters who plan to bid** on specific packages which will help ensure active bidding and strong selling prices.
- Selling packages virtually in real time can be risky. Instead, have your auctioneer and emcee **generate excitement** about the packages **by hitting the highlights**. If your event is live, your auctioneer can provide updates on the current bidding activity to inspire more participation.

How Ann Plans Can Help

In response to COVID-19's impact on nonprofit organizations and scheduled events, the Ann Plans team has embraced the shift to the virtual platform. Our expertise in areas including storytelling, audiovisual coordination, video production, and fundraising strategy have translated well to online events. Here are some of the ways we are supporting nonprofits as they pivot into the virtual space:

- Consultation on fundraising goals and sponsorship opportunities
- Development of creative direction, show flow, and key messages
- Marketing plan development including pre, day-of, and post-event strategies
- Copywriting for event webpages, social media, and other online communication
- Development of fundraising strategies
- Securing and managing audiovisual, mobile bidding and video production vendors
- Coordination of both pre-recorded and live on-camera speakers
- Online auction coordination
- Coordinating video production and slide presentation content
- Script writing
- Managing rehearsals and day-of event production

Are Virtual Events Here to Stay?

Humans are social by nature, and there is no experience that can completely replace the joy and synergy of bringing people together in person. That said, we do expect that many organizations will continue to utilize virtual platforms in ways they didn't prior to COVID-19. Moving forward, many more in-person events will have live streaming options for people who aren't able to be present physically. Now that organizations are becoming more comfortable with online engagement, we believe nonprofits will continue to be creative and strategic in how they can leverage virtual opportunities for staying connected with supporters and broadening their reach within the community.

Contact Us

We are committed to being a helpful resource to the nonprofit community. Here's how to reach us and stay connected:

- [Contact us](#) with questions or to discuss planning for a 2020 or 2021 event.
- Visit our [website](#) to learn more about our event planning work and resources.
- [Subscribe](#) to the Ann Plans monthly blog for event planning tips and trends.
- Check out recent blog posts [here](#).

**Thank you for engaging with our Virtual Event Resource Guide.
We hope you have found the information to be valuable and insightful.**

