

# Ann Plans Resource Guide for Virtual Fundraising Events

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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!

When clients first started canceling in-person events because of COVID-19, none of us expected that the impact of the pandemic on large in-person gatherings would be so long-lasting. The Ann Plans team continues to adapt and innovate to ensure the success of nonprofit virtual events during these uncertain times, and we are prepared to help clients pivot to hybrid and in-person events when it becomes safe to again bring people together in physical spaces.

The good news is that sponsors and donors have rallied behind virtual events, and we have experienced that many organizations are raising more money through their virtual event compared to their most recent in-person events. As long as virtual events remain the only or most viable option in the interest of health and safety for guests, we believe that supporters will continue to show up for and support virtual events.

We hope you find this resource helpful as you plan for your next event. Our team is committed to being a resource to the nonprofit community through our event planning services, consulting, and resource materials.

**Contact us** with questions or to discuss planning for an upcoming event.

**Subscribe** to the Ann Plans monthly blog for event planning tips and trends.



**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.*

# Virtual Fundraising Event Checklist

As with in-person events, there are many tasks and action items that go into planning and executing a successful virtual event. Here's a checklist to get you started:

- ☐ Identify event goals, fundraising focus and key messages.
- ☐ Create the sponsorship solicitation materials and begin contacting prospects.
- ☐ Recruit event committee members.
- ☐ Determine if your organization has the internal expertise to plan a successful virtual event from start to finish. If not, **contact** an experienced event planning/production company such as Ann Plans.
- ☐ Research and select the online giving platform.
- ☐ Contract with a trusted audiovisual company and video producer. Ann Plans has great vendor partners in these areas who are committed to the success of our clients' events.
- ☐ Develop and implement the marketing plan.
- ☐ Determine wish list of auction items and begin soliciting.
- ☐ Recruit your event ambassadors.
- ☐ Draft your show flow (program outline).
- ☐ Identify all speakers including emcee, auctioneer, organizational leadership, and clients.
- ☐ Confirm key fundraising components including momentum gifts and a matching gift.
- ☐ Create all of the key production elements including script, video assets, and PowerPoint slides.
- ☐ Schedule rehearsals.
- ☐ Produce an amazing virtual event experience!
- ☐ Follow up with thank yous including sharing fundraising results.

# Ten Virtual Event Fundraising Best Practices

Many elements of an in-person event translate well to the virtual space, but it is important to view a virtual event through a different lens with guests participating online rather than from an event venue.

The biggest and best surprise about virtual fundraising events is how well they have performed! These best practices will help ensure your audience is inspired to give generously.

- 1. Embrace your event as a several-day online giving campaign.** Well-marketed virtual events are experiencing strong online giving not only during the program, but also in the days leading up to the event. Continue the invitation to give in your post-event communications.
- 2. Carefully select an online giving platform** that has the capabilities and features that will best support your virtual event. The Ann Plans team has experience with several platforms and would be happy to help guide your decision making.
- 3. Recruit a team of key supporters to serve as virtual table hosts or event ambassadors** to engage their networks in participating in the event through registering, bidding in the auction, and donating. The ability to rally a core team of supporters is one of the best indicators of success with virtual events.
- 4. Make messaging on how to donate a through-line** of the program. Include information on the impact of gifts and the process for donating in the opening remarks. Have your speakers reinforce this messaging throughout the program and use graphics to illustrate how to give.
- 5. Focus significant planning time in crafting an inspiring program** that is fast-paced, heart-felt, and celebrates your organization's mission and impact.
- 6. Partner with a professional auctioneer** to help facilitate the fundraising during your event. Consider using the title of "fundraising host" for your auctioneer and have them co-host the program with your emcee. If your event has an online auction, your auctioneer can also generate excitement about your premium items.
- 7. Secure large pre-committed gifts** from several donors that can be announced during the program to build momentum for generous giving from as many households as possible.
- 8. Leverage a matching gift** from one or more donors by using this gift to inspire donations of specific dollar amounts or all donations during a specific time period.
- 9. Target having 70-80% of your total fundraising goal committed** prior to the start of your virtual program.
- 10. Celebrate progress towards the goal** throughout the program and widely share results in the days immediately following your event.

## Creating an Engaging and Inspiring Program

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, engaging and fun. Here are some tips for knocking it out of the park with your virtual program:

- **Keep the program short.** A 30-40 minute program will serve most organizations best. The Ann Plans team can help determine the most important and inspiring aspects of your organization to highlight.
- **Be comfortable going live!** With proper planning, there are advantages to having live elements of the program. Benefits include leveraging fundraising activity in real time, ability to refine messaging up until the event date, and the energy viewers experience with a live format.
- **Pre-recorded content is your friend.** For some virtual events, pre-recording all content makes sense. Live virtual events also benefit from a good amount of pre-recorded content.
- **Budget for quality audiovisual support** to help ensure your virtual event is professional and the potential for technical glitches is minimized.
- **Select one or two emcees** who are passionate about your cause to host the program. A host who is comfortable on camera, such as a media personality, will help ensure a professional, smooth-flowing and entertaining program.
- **Focus on storytelling.** The stories of how your organization is making a difference in the lives of individuals and the community are what will most inspire people to give.
- **Keep the pace fast moving** with several short segments. Have a goal of keeping each video and speaker element to 3 minutes or less.
- **Make it easy for people to give.** Clearly communicate throughout the program how people can make their donation. If your program includes an online auction, provide instructions on how to bid.
- **Rehearsals are critical.** The rehearsal ensures all speakers and the audiovisual team understand and are comfortable with the program flow and cues. Rehearsals also provide a final opportunity to make script refinements.
- **Program 15-30 minutes of a pre-show.** Content can include slides thanking sponsors and promoting auction items, facts about your organization, short video clips from sponsors and clients, and entertainment elements such as a cocktail demonstration.
- **Include 15-30 minutes of post-show content** for viewers to engage with as the chat activity and donating/bidding continue. This content can include some of the pre-show slides and/or provide a more interactive after-party experience.

## Tips for Maximizing Your Marketing Plan

When creating your marketing plan, think about your virtual event as a combination of 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.

- ✓ **Your most valuable marketing tool** is your team of virtual table hosts or event ambassadors who will rally their friends, colleagues and family members to register and participate.
- ✓ **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.
- ✓ **Make the registration process as easy as possible!** While we don't typically recommend requiring people to purchase a ticket to attend your virtual event, it is important to encourage people to register so they can receive pre-event updates.
- ✓ **Expand your mailing and email communication lists** to be more inclusive than you would if this was a ticketed in-person event. The beauty of a virtual event is there is no limit to the number of people who can attend and donate!
- ✓ **Promote the event on social media** including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. Post several times a week during the 3-4 weeks leading up to the event. We recommend making a small investment in boosting some posts.
- ✓ **Include short videos** in your pre-event marketing from individuals such as your emcee, event chair, CEO, and clients to generate interest and excitement.
- ✓ **Be clever with your social media.** This can include taking your audience behind-the-scenes of event preparation with photos of virtual committee meetings, video shoots, rehearsals, and the locations from where you will be broadcasting.
- ✓ **Send reminder emails and text messages** the week of your event with the link to participate. Some clients send a daily email the 3-5 days before the event and 2-3 reminders the day of the event.
- ✓ **Report back to supporters** in multiple ways such as phone calls, emails, social media, and a mailed thank you letter sharing the results and impact of the event. Expressing gratitude and communicating results are the two most important things you can do following your event.



## Creating Community Virtually

The longer the timeframe for when we are able to gather in large groups again, the more people are craving social interaction. While there is no perfect substitute for gathering in person, here are some strategies for creating community virtually while providing a fun and engaging event experience:

- Focus significant time on recruiting and communicating with your virtual table hosts or event ambassadors to get the people in their network excited about participating in the virtual event. **Encourage watch parties** and house parties if health guidelines allow.
- **Curate a gala box** or event kit that is delivered to key supporters in advance of the event with items that viewers can use to get in the mood for the event such as snacks and branded items. The Ann Plans team would love to discuss content ideas and distribution plans with you! Consider offering a paid VIP registration option where guests who choose this option will receive a gala box.
- Feature one or two **signature cocktail/mocktail recipes** from a local mixologist. Your pre-show programming can include a quick video clip of the mixologist shaking up the cocktails/mocktails. Include the beverage recipes in your gala boxes/event kits and on your website!
- Make sure your streaming platform has a **“chat” option to facilitate fun interaction** and dialogue amongst your viewers. Assign one or two staff members to acknowledge and encourage comments, share the donation link, and “chat up” the auction packages.
- Invite guests to dress creatively and in theme for the event. **Encourage the posting of photos** on social media using the event hashtag. A great way to facilitate this activity is through a virtual photo booth!
- Provide **opportunities for people to socialize and network**. Facilitate your virtual table hosts or event ambassadors gathering together pre or post-event through a platform such as a Zoom room. Invite top supporters to join your CEO for an intimate conversation immediately following the event to celebrate and comment on the program.
- **Display 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!
- Consider adding an **after-party experience** such as a virtual DJ dance party, scavenger hunt, trivia contest, comedian, or musical performance.

The Ann Plans team would love to help brainstorm interactive options for your upcoming virtual event!



## Positioning Your Online Auction for Success

A frequently asked question in virtual event planning is whether it makes sense to include an auction component. While curating auctions is more challenging right now, many organizations are experiencing strong results with their online auction. Best practices for online auctions include:

- If you have a **history of putting together strong auctions** and the staff and volunteer resources to successfully solicit items, including an auction component makes sense. For organizations where it would be a struggle to secure enough quality items, we recommend foregoing an auction and focusing on other fundraising elements of the event.
- Be creative in brainstorming the items you can secure that are **unique to your organization**.
- Anticipate that the number of items secured **will likely be smaller**.
- For experiences with expiration dates such as vacations and sporting events, work with the donor to have **maximum flexibility for redeeming the experience** to assure bidders during these uncertain times.
- Make sure your item descriptions **include all the key selling features** and restrictions. Provide crystal clear information on how and when the winning bidder can expect to claim or receive the particular item.
- Open your online auction **4-7 days before your virtual event** and close bidding one hour following the estimated end time of your program.
- **Actively promote** your online auction through social media and your pre-event emails. Have your virtual table hosts/event ambassadors share online auction details with their contacts.
- In lieu of incorporating a true live auction into your virtual event, we recommend highlighting a small number of items (4-6 items is the right number for most events) during your program as your **“featured” or “premier” items**.
- We love helping clients brainstorm auction possibilities! Items that are selling well online include **virtual experiences** such as wine tasting or cooking classes, **travel packages** with maximum flexibility for travel dates, **golf outings**, items and experiences that can be **enjoyed outdoors**, and **themed baskets** such as beer and cocktail baskets with products from local breweries and distilleries.

**Contact us** if you could use some inspiration in planning your auction.

## Planning for the Future of Fundraising Events

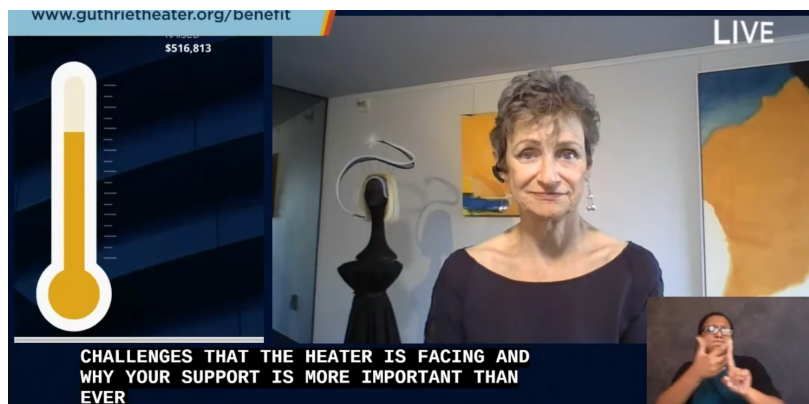
Like others in our field, we wish we could look in a crystal ball and predict exactly when in-person events will become the norm again. Without a doubt, large in-person gatherings will look different when they resume with health and safety needing to be top of mind.

We recognize that not everyone will be comfortable right away returning to large in-person settings, and for a while there will likely still be restrictions on gathering sizes. The next iteration of many events will be a hybrid format with some guests in person and others participating virtually.

Ann Plans is in conversation with vendor partners and event professionals around the country about hybrid event best practices and safety protocol for when large in-person gatherings can resume.

As part of our planning with clients for 2021 and 2022, we are creating plans for making the virtual event experience as engaging as possible while also developing creative solutions for hybrid and in-person events when those formats become viable again.

We welcome the opportunity to help you navigate your event planning during these uncertain times.



## How Ann Plans Can Help

In response to COVID-19's impact on events, the Ann Plans team has embraced the shift to the virtual space and is helping clients formulate plans for upcoming virtual events as well as preparing for what in-person and hybrid events will look like over the next several months and into 2022.

Our in-person event 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 in the virtual space and planning ahead for when in-person experiences will resume:

- ☐ Reimagining an in-person event as a virtual experience that is engaging, fun and focused on achieving fundraising, registration, and viewer experience goals
- ☐ Creating a first-time event experience that hits it out of the park
- ☐ Consulting on fundraising goals and sponsorship opportunities
- ☐ Developing 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
- ☐ Developing fundraising and registration/attendance strategies
- ☐ Online auction coordination
- ☐ Securing and coordinating planning with audiovisual, mobile bidding and video production vendors
- ☐ Coordinating video production
- ☐ Coaching and coordinating with pre-recorded and live on-camera speakers
- ☐ Creating slide presentation content
- ☐ Scriptwriting and script review
- ☐ Managing rehearsals and day-of-event production
- ☐ Facilitating post-event activities including donor acknowledgment and cultivation plans, event survey, and debrief meetings

We welcome questions and the opportunity to discuss your upcoming event. Please [contact us](#) to let us know how we can help!

## Additional Ann Plans Resources

### [FAQs for Nonprofit Fundraising Events](#)

### Some of Our Recent Blogs

- [Six Big Questions for 2021](#)
- [Minnesota Zoo Virtual Event Case Study](#)
- [Ten Virtual Event Best Practices](#)
- [Preparing Speakers for Virtual Success](#)
- [Tips for Online Auction Success](#)

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