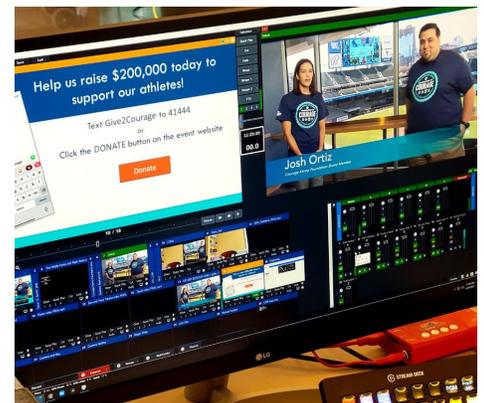


# Resource Guide for Virtual Fundraising Events *with Hybrid Event Insights*

Updated April 2022



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*Ann Plans, a Minnesota-based expert in fundraising events, has created this resource to provide nonprofit organizations with best practices, strategies, and tips for successfully engaging and inspiring supporters virtually.*

## Welcome to Our Resource Guide!

Without a doubt, 2022 is proving to be another interesting year for events. Ann Plans is working with clients on a variety of creative event formats with contingency plans in place.

When organizations first started cancelling in-person events because of COVID-19, none of us predicted how long-lasting the impact of the pandemic would be on nonprofit events. While many organizations have returned to hosting in-person events, sometimes as a hybrid with the option to participate virtually, many other organizations are choosing to keep some or all of their events as virtual experiences at this time.

The pandemic has provided many learnings that will continue to influence nonprofit events moving forward. Whether you are bringing people together in person, planning virtually, or offering a hybrid experience, be assured you can have a well-attended and successful fundraiser - as long as you have the right strategies, plans, and people in place.

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



**Ann Nelson**  
Senior Event Producer

*Ann Plans has been celebrating with and serving the nonprofit community since 2007. As experts in fundraising events, we partner with organizations in creating amazing in-person, virtual, and hybrid event experiences that inspire generosity. Our team specializes in supporting our clients' missions through purposeful storytelling and strategies that grow attendance, increase revenue, and cultivate supporters.*

**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.

# 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 an 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.
- Create a wish list of auction items and begin soliciting.
- Recruit your event ambassadors.
- Draft your run of show (program outline).
- Identify all speakers including emcee, auctioneer, organizational leadership, and clients.
- Confirm key fundraising components including momentum gifts and a matching gift.
- Create the key production elements including script, video assets, and PowerPoint slides.
- Schedule rehearsals.
- Produce an amazing virtual event experience!
- Follow up with thank yous and share fundraising results.

## Ten Virtual Event Fundraising Best Practices

Recruiting a large virtual audience has definitely become more challenging over the last several months, making your focus on marketing and fundraising strategies increasingly important.

These best practices will help ensure the success of your online event:

- 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 event ambassadors** to engage their networks in participating by registering to watch the program, 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 and the impact of gifts a through-line** of the program. Have your speakers reinforce this messaging throughout the program and use graphics to illustrate how to give and track fundraising progress.
- 5. Focus significant planning time in crafting an inspiring program** that is fast-paced, heartfelt, and celebrates your organization's mission and impact.
- 6. Partner with a professional auctioneer** to help facilitate the fundraising during your event. If your event has an online auction, have your auctioneer 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 an audience captive when people are tuning in from home, it is extra important that your program is short, mission-filled, engaging, and fun. Here are 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.
- **Budget for quality audiovisual support** to help ensure your virtual event looks professional and is executed seamlessly.
- **Select an emcee** who is passionate about your cause. 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 no more than 3-5 minutes.
- **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 minutes of a pre-show.** Content can include slides thanking sponsors and promoting auction items, facts about your organization, short video clips, and entertainment elements such as a cocktail demonstration.

## Tips for Maximizing Your Marketing Plan

When creating your marketing plan, think about your virtual event as a several-day online giving campaign. Provide supporters with the opportunity to donate prior to, during, and after your virtual event broadcasts.

- ✓ **Your most valuable marketing tool** is your team of 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 charging to attend your virtual event, it is important to encourage people to register so they can receive event updates and reminders of how to participate.
- ✓ **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 your 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, auctioneer, 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 committee meetings, video shoots, rehearsals, and the location 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 each of 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

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 inspiring your event ambassadors to get the people in their network excited about participating in the virtual event. **Encourage watch parties** for those who are comfortable hosting.
- **Curate a gala box** that is delivered to key supporters in advance of the event with items such as snacks and branded items. The Ann Plans team would love to discuss content ideas with you!
- Feature a **signature cocktail/mocktail recipe** 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 recipe on your website!
- Invite guests to dress creatively and in theme for the event. **Encourage the posting of photos** on social media using the event hashtag.
- Provide **opportunities for attendees to engage** with each other and your leadership. Invite your supporters to join in a Zoom conversation immediately following the virtual program to celebrate, comment on the program, and ask questions.
- **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 trivia contest or name that tune hosted by a DJ.

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



## Is Hybrid the Way to Go?

A hybrid event combines an in-person event with a virtual option which provides guests the choice of being present at the event venue or watching a livestream of the program from their computer or another device.

Here are four important considerations when deciding whether a hybrid event is the best option for your organization:

1. Do you believe you have a large number of supporters who won't attend in person but are likely to commit to watching virtually? Many clients have identified the answer as “no” while others have determined value in offering both participation options.
2. A hybrid event is the most expensive option from an audiovisual perspective, but adding a livestream option may not be as expensive as you think. Consult with your AV partner to explore how producing an event for both in-person and virtual audiences would impact your budget.
3. When planning a hybrid event, it's critical that you focus on your virtual audience. You know you can host a great in-person event. The bigger challenge is creating an experience that is also engaging for your virtual audience.
4. Keep in mind that if you decide to be 100% in-person, an important part of your overall fundraising strategy is to invite non-attendees to participate with a donation. Following your event, make it a priority to share the videos from your program via your website, social media, and emails.



## Tips for an Engaging Hybrid Experience

Anything you can do to make your virtual guests feel an important part of your event experience will go a long way. Here are some ways to do that:

- Identify a host for the virtual audience. Have someone dedicated to interacting with your online guests by welcoming them and setting the stage for an engaging experience.
- Keep the program short. Structure your run of show so that all program elements that are intended for both the in-person and virtual audiences happen within one block of time. We recommend keeping the program to 30-45 minutes.
- Start the program on time! You want to avoid having the people tuning in from home waiting while you get your guests and crew set for showtime at the event venue.
- Add visual interest to the program. Work with your audiovisual and décor partners to design a stage backdrop that translates well both in the ballroom and on screen for those watching from home.
- Invest in production. Partner with an audiovisual company that is experienced in producing a seamless and engaging program for two audiences simultaneously.
- Highlight your at-home audience. Incorporate program messaging that welcomes and acknowledges your online guests and find ways to make them feel an important part of the fundraising.
- Take the auction online. Make it possible for everyone to bid on your silent auction packages. For those virtual guests wanting to participate in the live auction, this can be facilitated through a proxy bidder.
- Include a virtual after-party experience. Conclude the event experience with an opportunity for your online guests to interact and have some fun together.

## Positioning Your Auction for Success

One of the outcomes of the pandemic is that many more organizations now have experience with online auctions. With a number of nonprofits returning to in-person and hybrid events, many are choosing to make their auction available online so as many people as possible can participate.

Whether your upcoming event will be virtual, in-person, or hybrid, here are some tips to help ensure auction success:

- If you have a **history of putting together strong auctions** and the people power to successfully solicit items, including an auction component makes sense. Otherwise, we recommend focusing your energy on more lucrative fundraising elements.
- 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** than they might have been before the pandemic.
- For experiences with expiration dates such as vacations and sporting events, work with the donor to have **maximum flexibility for redeeming the experience**.
- Make sure your item descriptions **include all the key selling features** and restrictions. For online auctions, provide clear information on how and when the winning bidder can expect to claim or receive the item.
- Open online bidding **5-7 days before your event date**. If your event is in-person, plan to close bidding before your live auction and fund-a-need. For virtual-only events, close bidding either within the hour following your event program or the next day.
- **Actively promote** your auction through social media and your pre-event emails. Encourage your event ambassadors to share the online auction link with their contacts.
- We love helping clients brainstorm auction possibilities! Items that are selling well include **travel packages, 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.
- For in-person and hybrid events, the best way to facilitate live auction bidding for people not in the room is to have **proxy bidders** who are prepared to bid for the absentee bidders.

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

## Planning for the Future of Fundraising Events

As Ann Plans strategizes and plans with clients for 2022 events, most organizations are planning for in-person or hybrid event experiences, with some still planning to be 100% virtual.

Here's an overview of the current event landscape:

- Organizations with in-person events on the schedule are formulating contingency plans in case a shift in format and/or date becomes the best decision.
- Many nonprofits have pushed their event date further out in the year or to 2023 in hopes of fewer implications from COVID-19.
- An increasing number of events are scheduled to take place in the warmer months at venues with a good amount of outdoor space.
- Attendance at many in-person events will be smaller than pre-pandemic, but that doesn't mean you can't still meet or exceed your fundraising goals. Several nonprofits are raising more money with fewer people in the room.
- Organizations are working closely with venues and other vendor partners to ensure contracted language is clear regarding the implications of potential shifts needed in relation to the pandemic.
- Experience with virtual events has provided many important learnings including how much meaningful content can be packed into a short program and opportunities to engage a larger audience of supporters.

**We welcome the opportunity to help you plan for success!**



## How Ann Plans Can Help

Ann Plans is committed to helping nonprofits create memorable event experiences that exceed fundraising goals, are flawlessly executed, and receive rave reviews. Whether you are planning a virtual event, hybrid, or in-person event experience, we have the expertise and resources to help you hit it out of the park.

Here are some of the ways we provide guidance and support to our clients:

- Designing engaging and mission-focused event experiences
- Advising on sponsorship opportunities and fundraising strategies
- Managing the master planning timeline and budget
- Creating and executing the marketing plan
- Managing vendor partnerships
- Auction coordination
- Décor planning
- Video production and audiovisual coordination
- Run of show development and script writing
- Coaching speakers
- Rehearsal coordination and show call direction
- Managing day-of event logistics and production
- Facilitating post-event surveys, reporting, and donor cultivation

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

The Ann Plans monthly blog is a great resource for nonprofit event news, tips, and trends. Sign up for this free communication and view our complete library of blogs [here](#) on the Nonprofit Event Resources page of our website.

Here are links to some of our recent blogs:

- [Common Denominators for Fundraising Event Success](#)
- [Eight Strategies for Minimizing Virtual Event Fatigue](#)
- [Back to the Ballroom with Virtual Event Learnings](#)
- [What Is the Best Plan for You?](#)
- [A Heartfelt Evening of Virtual Success](#)

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