



The Case for Hybrid Fundraising Events: Learning from the Pandemic¹

Introduction

Large groups of people can once more gather in one place, inside and even maskless, for galas, awards ceremonies, and other events that collectively generate tens of millions of dollars for nonprofit organizations in the U.S. And tens of thousands of nonprofit executives, board members, and development staff breathed a collective sigh of relief at the return to almost-normal fundraising events. This probably included the vast majority of Latino and other community of color nonprofits.

A look online in the spring of 2022 found that few of these nonprofits were planning hybrid fundraisers – events that include both in-person and online components. Most were not planning any remote components for their galas – not live-streamed short programs or performances, not remote access to paddle-raising/fund-a-need direct fundraising through smartphone apps, not online raffles, not even silent auctions that begin a few days or a week before the actual gala. Even organizations that reported great success with online galas in 2020 or 2021 have apparently left those experiences behind.

That may be a mistake.



Benefits of Remote Event Components

Clearly, gathering together is one of the attractive aspects of an event, and isolation was among the most challenging aspects of the pandemic. But remote fundraising also has major benefits, especially made a part of an otherwise in-person event. For example:

- **Larger audiences:** Most galas, especially meal events, are limited to a few hundred people. There is no real limit to the number of people who can bid online for a silent auction item or tune in for live-streamed stories about your nonprofit's impact on real people, along with a musical or other performance. Many will also buy a raffle ticket online or stay connected for a live auction or paddle-raising, and may text a gift or contribute through a smartphone app.
- **Donor acquisition:** Even if you charge very little or nothing to people who livestream an event, by pairing stories and presentations with 1-2 performances you can reach dozens or hundreds of new potential donors – as long as you require some form of “registration” before the event or when they tune in that gives you their contact information.
- **Broader geographic coverage:** People who have heard about the organization and care about its work but don't live nearby have the ability to participate remotely. Former clients,



¹ Prepared by Emily Gantz McKay of EGM Consulting, LLC, in April 2022.

staff, or supporters who move away can stay connected. Even people who live in the metro area but a considerable distance from the event location may hesitate to participate in-person at an evening event, especially during the week. The online option includes them.

- **A preferred option for some supporters:** The COVID-19 pandemic has made many people reluctant to attend live events with large numbers of people, especially inside. Older supporters, individuals with compromised immune systems, and those with family members who are high-risk may be unwilling to come to a traditional in-door event. While online attendance isn't the same as being in the same place, a well-designed program can provide a sense of shared support for a common cause.
- **A way to engage younger, social media-oriented people:** A study before the pandemic found that Generation Z teenagers and adults (people born between 1996 and 2010) spend, on average, five hours a day on their smartphones, 59% said they were "inspired to donate to a charity through a social media message," and one in five said that "their impact in the world is an important issue in their day-to-day life."² A September 2020 report by Zelle, the payment app, said that almost three-fourths of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) have provided "financial aid to family or friends or donated to a nonprofit" since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this was the highest rate among the generations polled.³ Millennials give and share information about their favorite causes "on social media and crowdfunding donations," and are "drawn to social causes and inspire and invite their full engagement."⁴
- **Affordability:** Typical event costs – for food, beverages, and facilities – are generally much lower for the remote component of an event. Some nonprofits spent a great deal on equipment and software for their remote events, but often have major expenditures for in-person events as well. Many of the fundraising software platforms and systems used for in-person events also have remote components. And less costly options are available. There are many reliable reviews of software for online and hybrid and silent auctions, free and low-cost live-streaming options, and affordable text-to-give and paddle-raising smartphone apps. (Some are included in the footnotes to this summary.)
- **Source of unrestricted funds.** One of the greatest challenges faced by BIPOC⁵-led and other small nonprofits is obtaining general operating support. As discussed in a recent panel assembled by the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, BIPOC organizations typically find it very challenging to obtain general operating support grants from foundations.⁶ If you run a small



² "3 Must-Know Stats about Gen Z Donors," Nonprofit Tech for Good, October 4, 2018; <https://www.nptechforgood.com/2018/10/04/3-must-know-stats-about-gen-z-donors/>.

³ Megan Leonhardt, "Nearly 3 out of 4 millennials have donated money during the pandemic," CNBC, September 30, 2020; <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/29/more-millennials-donated-money-during-the-pandemic-than-other-generations.html>.

⁴ Shirley Hoss, "The Future of Giving: Trends Shaping Next-Gen Philanthropy," Forbes Nonprofit Council, December 27, 2021; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2021/12/27/the-future-of-giving-trends-shaping-next-gen-philanthropy/?sh=3ef5adcd1b88>.

⁵ Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

⁶ Dan Parks, "General Operating Support is Vital to Advancing Equity, Strengthening Nonprofits, Say Leaders," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 12, 2022; <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/general-operating-support-is-vital-to-advancing-equity-strengthening-nonprofits-say->

BIPOC nonprofit, you probably depend on fundraising events and individual donations for most of your flexible funds. Remote fundraising activities help provide those essential resources.

These benefits can translate into more donors and increased revenues both immediately and in the long-term. Follow up with new donors or online participants can make them regular supporters. Young people may be able to give more over time. The benefits are likely to be greatest, especially with younger donors, if you commit to regular communications via social media, providing stories that document your impact, and offering opportunities for engagement, from advocacy to volunteering.

Remote and Hybrid Options

Almost any event offers opportunities for remote components. Some are very low-cost, while others require greater investment. Here are just a few, all appropriate as part of an event that is partially or largely in person.

Livestreaming: You can livestream a performance, a compelling story of your organization's importance and impact, or your whole gala or awards program – ideal length is 45 minutes. You



can also livestream part of a different kind of event, like the finish line of your 5K run. You can use livestreaming even if you have a limited tech budget and limited video skills. Livestreaming is engaging because your audience can participate in real time, and you can create a sense of urgency to act/give immediately. Basic equipment needs include a computer, webcam, separate standing microphones or lapel mics,

streaming software, a good, reliable internet connection, and a platform to stream to.⁷ Among the options: Facebook Live (it's free, and the recording will be automatically posted to your organization's Facebook page), YouTube Live, Instagram Live (especially popular with 18-24 year olds), Twitch, Twitter, and LinkedIn. You can also livestream using your current videoconferencing software like Zoom (invite current donors who can't attend in-person).⁸ Be sure to check the technology to ensure quality (essential for successful livestreaming). Link livestreaming to giving and make it very easy to donate. For example, if your nonprofit is "registered with Facebook's charitable giving tools, you can encourage people to add a donate button to their livestream," and viewers can donate during or after the broadcast.⁹ Instagram also has a live donation button. If you have your own online giving system, just include a link to the DONATE page on your website. After the event, use the recording for other purposes, edit it down, or create short highlights for your website or YouTube.

Auctions: Many nonprofits include auctions as part of their annual gala or awards dinner. Most have made these auctions an extra fundraising opportunity during an in-person event.

[leaders?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_4143805_nl_Nonprofit-Adviser_date_20220425&cid=na&source=ams&sourceid=.](#)

⁷ Alex ByByk, "Charity streaming: Everything you need to know," Restream Blog, November 27, 2021; <https://restream.io/blog/charity-streaming-guide/>.

⁸ "Live Streaming for Nonprofits: Your Guide to Virtual Success," OneCause, undated; <https://www.onecause.com/blog/live-streaming-for-nonprofits/>.

⁹ Julia Campbell, "The Essential guide to Livestream Fundraising," NonProfitPRO, October 15, 2020; <https://www.nonprofitpro.com/article/the-essential-guide-to-livestream-fundraising/>.

However, a nonprofit good at obtaining attractive auction items sometimes found that a dinner for 300 or even 500 people provided an insufficient universe of bidders. In addition, as their event's ticket price increased, some loyal middle-income attendees became less likely to bid on more costly items. Even before the pandemic required remote fundraising, some nonprofits expanded their silent auctions to include an online component. By putting the auction online a week before the actual event, and using social media to highlight the importance of the organization and advertise the auction, they greatly increased the number of potential bidders. Technology enabled remote bidders to bid before the event and then continue monitoring a favorite item and increase their bid during the actual event. Some nonprofits included a few high-cost live auction items, like trips or a meal with (or cooked by) a celebrity, and used livestreaming and mobile bidding software to maximize bidding for these large-ticket items. More bidders often meant a livelier process, and higher revenues for the nonprofit. These organizations had the advantage of experience when the pandemic required entirely remote auctions. Today, nonprofits can find many companies that support a combination of online and in-person, silent and live auctions,¹⁰ from mobile bidding to tracking bids, handling registrations, creating online catalogues, and managing checkouts. Some charge platform fees, while others charge by transaction. GalaBid says it charges only a credit card transaction fee (2.75%), and requests a voluntary contribution from participants. A recent assessment of nonprofit auction software requires that all be specifically designed for nonprofits; "create auction listings, bid sheets, online auctions, or auction catalogs"; and help set up "live auctions; online auctions, silent auctions, or a combination"; "collect payment from donors and organize donor information"; and provide fundraising reports. Among the highest rated: OneCause, GiveSmart, Silent Auction Pro, Handbid, Auctria, Qgiv, and Accelevents.¹¹

Text-to-Give Messaging: Text messages are a great way to keep remote participants engaged during a livestream, or to encourage bids for your online silent auction or live auction items. Texting can also be used for donations. Many tools – some of them quite affordable – can allow people to text a donation using a special password, bid during a live auction, or make a donation and have their names and gifts recorded and projected on a screen or online. Services include mobile bidding technology that lets participants bid or donate right from their phones without downloading an app (e.g., Accelevents) to software that allows for quick texted donations (SecureGive), apps for small \$5-\$10 donations that appear on the donor's mobile phone bill (Activistic), and mobile giving for auctions and other event tools (OneCause, Snowball).¹²



¹⁰ "Top 16 Silent Auction Software for Live and Virtual Events," OneCause, undated; <https://www.onecause.com/blog/top-silent-auction-software/>.

¹¹ "Best Nonprofit Auction Software," G2, 2022; <https://www.g2.com/categories/nonprofit-auction>.

¹² "Top 10+Tex-to-Give or Donate Services, Double the Donation, undated; <https://doublethedonation.com/tips/top-fundraising-software-and-tools/text-to-give-tools-for-nonprofits/>.

Hybrid paddle-raising: Many galas include a time set aside for direct fundraising, with participants asked to “raise their paddles” to announce their donation publicly. (It is sometimes



called “fund-a-need” fundraising.) Corporate sponsors often make additional financial commitments during this time, and many participants make contributions, large and small. This approach can be engagingly competitive, and participants often find it

energizing. Loyal donors who have already indicated a planned commitment may be asked to announce it early in the process to encourage other contributions. Fundraising consultants developed guidelines for successful paddle raisers.¹³ Some nonprofits began to include mobile giving by those present as an alternative to physically raising a paddle.¹⁴ During the pandemic, some nonprofits found that paddle raising worked well as a remote activity, especially when the donations and donors were immediately announced during a livestream. This approach can also be effective as a hybrid activity. Those present can raise actual paddles, or both in-person and virtual participants can use a smartphone app to make their donations. The name and amount given flash quickly across a large screen in the event facility and on the smartphone screen of remote donors. Often an electronic thermometer is used, or some other visual showing progress towards the fundraising goal. Many providers offer mobile giving software that can be used for a hybrid paddle raiser, and also offer detailed guidance for planning this part of your fundraising event.¹⁵ There is also relatively low-cost software specifically for paddle-raising.¹⁶ The software requirements for paddle raising are very similar to those for auctions.



Many other hybrid tools and components can support and enhance fundraising events – from raffles to numerous hybrid peer-to-peer activities – from virtual 5K walks or runs to purchase of



special T-shirts or other items that create a sense of community and teamwork. Offering remote participation opportunities expands your audience and ultimately, your donors. Some activities are relatively costly, while others are very inexpensive. Consider your own organization, its needs and capabilities.

The important thing is to consider remote and hybrid fundraising activities as valuable, ongoing fundraising tools – not just the only alternative when bringing large groups of people together is impossible or unsafe.

¹³ Here’s an excellent pre-pandemic guide: “The Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting a Record-Breaking Paddle Raiser,” The Gala Team, March 10, 2019; <https://thegalateam.com/paddle-raiser-guide>.

¹⁴ “Paddle Raise or Mobile Giving?” GiveSmart Blog, October 18, 2019; <https://www.givesmart.com/blog/paddle-raise-or-mobile-giving/>.

¹⁵ See for example “How to Conduct an Appeal,” Handbid; <https://service.handbid.com/how-to-conduct-an-appeal>.

¹⁶ “Raise-the-Paddle Events,” ClickBid; <https://clickbidonline.com/raise-the-paddle-auctions/>.