

Sage Nonprofit Solutions

20 Publicity Ideas for “A-Thon” Fundraising Success



Fundraising through community events such as walk-a-thons has become increasingly popular in the not-for-profit community. Whether you create a walk-a-thon, a golf-a-thon, or a mustache-a-thon (yes, it really exists!), your event will be a terrific way to:

- Raise awareness of your mission,
- Build support within your community, and
- Increase fundraising.

This guide contains twenty tips to help you turn your next “A-Thon” event into a successful donation-a-thon! Apply these ideas to promote maximum engagement with your sponsors, event participants, donors, and community.

1. Pick Your Date Carefully

To get the community involved, you should choose a weekend day. Choose a time of year with pleasant weather. Remember, your participants can dress more warmly if the weather is cool, but it is difficult to beat the heat during hot, humid times of year. Finally, make sure to check with other local not-for-profit organizations to avoid overlapping events.

Technology Tip: You’re hoping for the best possible weather for your A-Thon fundraiser. To see the historic average high and low temperatures for any day of the year, go to www.weather.com, enter your city, and click the “Month” tab.

2. Create a Dedicated Publicity Committee

About one year ahead of your event, you’ll want to create a publicity plan. The first step is to name a Publicity Chair and form a committee of staff and/or volunteers that will help with publicity related tasks. From 6-12 months out, plan for your committee to meet at least once per month. Closer to the event, you will meet more frequently to keep everything on track.

Technology Tip: It can be difficult to schedule meetings, especially if you’re including outside volunteers. For a free online scheduling tool, try www.doodle.com or www.setameeting.com. In just a few minutes, you can propose several different dates and times and send an email link to committee members. Each person indicates his or her availability and you can easily see when their schedules align.

3. Get on Calendars Early

For a successful A-Thon event, you’ll need the participation of your organization’s supporters and donors. Send out save-the-date postcards several months in advance of your event. Mention the event and the date in any communications that you send to donors. You’ll also want to submit your event to community calendars that are kept and published by:

- Television and radio stations
- Local newspapers
- Local magazines
- Chamber of Commerce
- Convention & Visitors Bureau
- Church newsletters

Technology Tip: Several nationwide Websites provide local event calendars and are growing in popularity. Consider listing your event on upcoming.yahoo.com, www.eventful.com, or www.charityhappenings.org (for large cities).

4. Recruit Corporate Sponsors

Corporate sponsors can add so much to an A-Thon event. They can provide funds that help you purchase the things you need to plan for the event. Sponsors can make in-kind donations of much-needed items like printing, publicity, or concessions. They can also encourage employees to form teams and participate in your event.

Corporations sponsor charity events to make a positive contribution to the community and foster good will. Any way that you can help them generate good publicity will increase the value they perceive and improve the chances of receiving their sponsorship. Prominently feature sponsors on event literature, Website, t-shirts, advertising, and signage. Recognize their contributions during the event, too. Having different levels of sponsorship available (with corresponding levels of benefits) can help you to get more small and medium sized businesses involved.

5. Create a Website or Blog

When promoting an event such as an A-Thon, it helps to provide a single source of information the community can access. Set up a blog or Website with a URL that is easy to remember. Then put that address on your flyers, direct mail, and other materials. You can even include it in listings on community calendars and print it on any t-shirts that you distribute early.

Technology Tip: You can set up your organization’s new blog at no charge by visiting www.blogger.com or www.wordpress.com.

6. Get Social

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 46% of American adults now use social media tools such as FaceBook, MySpace, and LinkedIn.¹ So it should come as no surprise that 88% of your colleagues in the nonprofit community are experimenting with social media.² Make it easy for your supporters, donors, and participants to share information about your A-Thon event with their social network and start building a social network presence for your organization.

Technology Tip: Give your network of supporters the tools that they can use to ask friends and family for donations on their social networking Websites. A “widget” is an application that your supporters can place on a Website or social networking profile quickly and easily. It serves as a mini fundraising page with donations processed directly and securely through your normal online donation system.

7. Remember the Rule of Threes

The Rule of Threes is a time-tested marketing theory. It states that a person must hear about your event three times before they will remember it and possibly take action. You will need to speak to the community about your event many times, in order to ensure that people hear it enough to drive them to take action.

¹Amanda Lenhart, *The Democratization of Social Media*, presentation given on October 8, 2009. Accessed online at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Presentations/2009/41--The-Democratization-of-Online-Social-Networks.aspx>

²“Weber Shandwick Social Impact Survey Finds 88% of Nonprofits Experimenting with Social Media While Struggling to Demonstrate its Value to their Organizations,” November 12, 2009, CNNMoney.com

8. Use Multiple Channels of Communication

Potential donors and participants for your event probably have different ways they prefer to communicate. Keep this in mind, along with the Rule of Threes, when you create your publicity plan. Utilize as many channels as you can, including Email, social media, postcards, newspapers, and radio or TV, to help get your message out.

Technology Tip: Keep your donor and participant databases in-house so that you can keep in touch with these supporters and invite them to future events. Planning an A-Thon can take a lot of time and it’s tempting to outsource your fundraising efforts. By maintaining control over your own data, you will incur fewer fees and ensure that your donor list remains up-to-date. After all, nobody understands your organization’s mission better than you do!

9. Make it Personal

Donors want to make a connection between the donation they are giving and helping a person. It is easier to make this connection through individual stories. Studies show that human empathy tends to diminish as we are asked to help a larger and larger group of people in need. Give your community personal, individual stories that demonstrate why your mission is important.

10. Demonstrate the Impact of Donations

Today’s donors want to see evidence of the difference they are making. Be very specific about your mission in all of your fundraising appeals. What program(s) will the funds generated by you A-Thon event support? What impact does that program have on the lives of others? What difference will it make if your organization achieves its fundraising goal versus falling short?

Technology Tip: Use online “thermometers” that show your financial goal and the amount of donations received. Seeing your organization get closer to your goal will keep your participants and donors motivated and excited.

11. Solicit Matching Funds

If you can find a corporate sponsor or other benefactor who is willing to provide matching funds, you will find that more people will become involved with your event and that you can raise more money. That is because they perceive that their efforts, in the form of participation (walking) or donation, will have twice the impact.

12. Free Publicity is as Good as it Gets

If your organization is like most, your budget is limited. But a big community event is a great vehicle for achieving free publicity for your organization and your mission. Ask local television and radio stations if they will run public service announcements (PSA) for your event. You might even want to ask a local member of the media to be the host / emcee of your event. Often, local newspapers will run an article about your event in their community or lifestyle sections. Also try local magazines and business journals.

Technology Tip: Want to make it easier for donors to find your organization on the Web? Try applying to Google Grants, which provides free Google AdWords advertising for nonprofit organizations. Learn more at <http://www.google.com/grants/index.html>

13. Provide Email Templates for Teams

Seventy-eight percent of U.S. adults now use the Internet, and nearly all of those (91%) send and receive Email.³ Most of us will open and read emails from friends, colleagues and family. So it makes perfect sense to empower A-Thon participants to communicate directly with potential donors via email. By providing an email template that is easy to use, you will extend the reach of your organization far beyond your traditional online fundraising database.

Technology Tip: Your organization needs to expand its email list so that your online fundraising success will continue to grow. Let your donors and A-Thon participants help you extend your online reach by adding a “Send to a Friend” button to your emails.

14. Remove Barriers to Online Giving from Your Website

Sixty-six percent of major donors check out an organization online before committing to donate.⁴ While they are online researching your organization, it’s a perfect time to receive an immediate online donation. According to a recent survey, 80% of major donors have made online charitable donations and 51% prefer to give online because it’s faster, more efficient, and they can give while it’s on their minds. When you are doing publicity for your event, make sure you aren’t losing opportunities to raise funds by presenting them with a poorly designed Website.

Technology Tip: Your home page and event page should contain three essential items: a concrete definition of your mission, personal descriptions of the impact your organization makes, and a prominently featured “Donate Now” button. For even better conversions, embed a donation form right on the page that is secure, simple to use, and requires no additional clicks to other pages.

15. Put Your Event on T-Shirts

T-shirts are a wonderful way to promote your A-Thon. Provide t-shirts to your best supporters as early as possible; as they wear the shirts, they raise awareness about the upcoming event. Feature your sponsors on the shirts to provide them with an additional opportunity for publicity. Finally, sell shirts on your event Website (or blog) and at the event to raise additional money.

16. Eat, Drink and Be Merry.

A concession stand serves several purposes at your event. By taking care of participants, they can walk further and raise more funds. Onlookers and supporters will remain at your event longer if they are not hungry or thirsty. And concessions will raise additional money for your mission. For additional impact, try to get the refreshments donated by volunteers (pot luck or bake sale) or a corporate sponsor. Check local ordinances if you plan to have volunteers supply food.

17. Sell Raffle Tickets

To get more people to your event, consider offering additional activities for those who did not wish to directly participate (non-walkers). You can raffle off door prizes to raise some extra money and give the onlookers some extra fun.

³Pew Internet & American Life Project, “Generational difference in online activities,” January 28, 2009. Accessed online at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Infographics/Generational-differences-in-online-activities.aspx>

⁴“Wired Wealthy’ Give Online, But Find Web Sites Boring,” The Nonprofit Times, accessed online at http://www.nptimes.com/technobuzz/TB20080325_1.html.

18. Hold an Auction

A live auction or silent auction is another fun way to generate extra donations at the event. Get local businesses to provide items you can auction. Your event emcee can oversee the auction.

19. Photograph the Event

You can use your event photos in many fun and creative ways. Publish photos on your Website, include them in next year’s event publicity posters and pamphlets, or create keepsake photo books to use as thank you gifts to sponsors or team captains.

20. Don’t Forget to Say ‘Thank You’

Everyone who helped make your event a success should receive a personalized thank you note. Send a thank you gift and letter to your sponsors, recognizing their contribution and the impact it will have on your mission. Many organizations opt to invite participant/team captains to a special post-event celebration, where you can hand out prizes and recognize their efforts.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that fundraising consumes a great deal of time and resources. It can also be extremely rewarding. Hopefully, these tips will help you make your next fundraiser a success. There are many others available to you, as well.

Keep in mind that tools alone are not enough; you have to use them well. Creating a sustainable strategy, and following through, are the most important steps to achieving your mission.

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