

A detailed pink line-art illustration of various flowers and foliage, including ginkgo leaves, hydrangeas, and ferns, serves as a background for the entire page. A small horizontal pink line is positioned above the subtitle.

The Planners' Guide to

galas

A charity's existence can hinge on the success of its fundraising events. Here's how to create an extravaganza that delights both attendees and the CFO

by Wendy Helfenbaum

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Fundraising galas offer the perfect opportunity to engage attendees who want to support a worthy cause while also enjoying a memorable event.

Getting every detail right while injecting major wow-factor requires extensive planning, creativity and savvy know-how, says Jennifer Bassett, founder and CEO of Bassett Events in Toronto.

"There are so many galas now in Toronto that there's a lot of gala fatigue," she says. "It's all about guest experience—whether that's through food, entertainment, or location—and you can only make a first impression once." Here's how to make sure your event stands out.



BC Children's Hospital
Foundation For Children
We Care Gala 2018 raised \$3.3 million.



Define and set goals

Whether you're aiming to raise money, awareness or both, it's important to be clear about what you're hoping to accomplish, says Caitlin McElhone, owner and lead planner of CM Events in Edmonton.

"Typically, organizations bring in an event professional because they've seen a decline in sponsorship or sales; they've plateaued in their profits and want someone to help rebrand and refocus the event," says McElhone, whose most recent high-end gala saw 700 attendees gather at the Shaw Conference Centre in Edmonton to raise money for the CASA Foundation, which supports child, adolescent and family mental health.

"You can't raise \$500,000 or \$1 million if your ticket sales are \$150 a person; you need that one per cent of the population that can afford to be there, so that's usually where we start: Who needs to be at this event and how much money do we need to raise?" she says.

As director of events at BC Children's Hospital Foundation in Vancouver, Carly Jokic works with the hospital to identify its most urgent needs. Funds are raised at three annual galas.

"During our campaign to build a new hospital, our three galas were structured around delivering towards the campaign, and then we focused on the next big things, such as equipment and research," she says.

Team up

"Our organization covers the entire province, and we're a staff of six; we simply couldn't do large-scale events without committees and volunteers," says Kate Udle, event lead at the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia in Dartmouth, NS. Udle's flagship event, the Festival of Trees, spans two days in late November: a traditional

holiday lunch and silent auction for 700 guests, followed by a black-tie gala the next night.

"We put a lot of trust in our volunteers and give them a lot of responsibility," says Udle. "Finding people who have the confidence, assertiveness and willingness to leverage their contacts is key, because so much of committee work is asking for things: people's time, their money or their products," says Udle.

Jokic's team relies on volunteers' networks, since two of the organization's three annual galas target members of the South Asian and Chinese communities.

"Our volunteers really help us understand the story to tell that audience," she says. "We see our volunteers as ambassadors for the foundation. Many are parents with a patient story to tell, or business people with personal connections. Others want to give back to where they live and work."

Find your venue vibe

Unless your event is so large-scale that only the convention centre will cut it, scout out unique spaces that will lend a distinctive flavour, suggests Bassett, such as private homes or airport hangars.

"We've done events at car dealerships such as Mercedes Benz and Porsche; by incorporating those \$300,000 vehicles into your decor, your decor budget is next to nothing," she says.

Consider what kind of partnership can be forged to make your gala budget go farther, suggests Jokic. "The Four Seasons has been a venue sponsor for our Crystal Ball for 32 years, and they've also supported our other events, so they've been an unbelievable partner," she notes. "They anticipate our needs, they've really raised the bar, and they give us great discounts because we are able to offer them sponsorship in exchange."

Be unpredictable

Gone are the days where it was good enough to host a dance party, says McElhone. To woo the seen-everything gala crowd, your theme must not only be creative, but also tie into your messaging and branding.

“In Edmonton, it’s the same group of people that go to all the high-end gala fundraisers, so we really need to step up our game each year to wow people with an experience,” says McElhone, whose past themes include *A Night on the Bayou* and *Great Gatsby*.

“Take them through a story that’s intertwined with your organization’s objectives and values, and then blow them away from the moment they open your invitation to the actual event. You have to spend money to make money.”

Stay on message

McElhone prefers avoiding live speeches in favour of video storytelling and messaging woven into the event’s entertainment.

“By the time you get to a live auction or cash appeal to raise extra money, people are excited, willing and able to contribute,” she says.

At Udle’s luncheon event, her team is mindful that guests need to return to work, so shorter performances such as a fiddle trio or children’s choir fit the bill.

Often, planning fundraising galas comes down to relationships, notes Bassett, whose client at the Oregon Project was able to score a charitable rate to get Carrie Underwood to perform at their event last year. In June, another client’s relationship with Wyclef Jean also led to a discounted appearance.

Strategize your marketing

Non-profits seeking to maximize revenues are especially careful about marketing budgets, says Udle. “It’s not necessarily a great use of our donor dollars, and social media has allowed us to spread the word in a very cost-effective manner,” she explains, adding that a strong social media following and database of donors also helps get messaging across through strategic e-blast campaigns.

McElhone believes in proven old-school techniques to sell the room: mailed invitations and personal phone calls.

“Our target audience is a very private group; they get invited to lots of events, and they’re not going to find you on Facebook,” she says. “For them, it’s about that personal touch.”

Bassett suggests setting aside funds to hire a PR company to handle press releases, field media calls and manage the red carpet. To provide extra value, her team produces a two-minute video of the event, which she gives to clients to market next year’s event. She also uses it on her own website to showcase her work to potential clients.

Jokic’s team sends along a thank-you video to attendees. “We’re inviting them to see the true impact of what their funds have raised. That’s really a key part of our marketing,” she says.



CASA Gala 2018: Jazz Age

CASA Gala 2017:
Night on the Bayou





The BC Children's Hosiptial
Foundation 2017 Crystal Ball Gala
raised \$2.8 million.

Fundraising ideas

Beyond ticket sales, planners need to encourage guests to keep giving throughout the event, says Udle, who regularly plans silent and live auctions to generate funds. Jokic goes high-tech for silent auctions, using iPads and leader boards to create a sense of competition.

McElhone adds that as Gen Xers and Millennials start moving up the corporate ladder, on-site fundraisers need to reflect their interests. For example, she limits the live auction to one or two special items.

"You need to sell an experience that you'd never be able to have in your life unless you bid on it that night to raise money, like an excursion to someone's private vacation property in Hawaii, paired with a private flight and a chef or music experience," she explains.

Some of the on-site fundraising ideas Bassett recommends to clients include selling keys for \$100 apiece to a locked box containing a donated piece of jewelry.

"If you have 300 people and want to raise \$200,000, boom—there's \$30,000 right there," she says. She's also done a wall of rolled-up baby blankets, sold for \$100 each to support a family at St. Michael's Hospitals NICU.

No matter where you hold your gala, or what food you serve, give yourself plenty of lead-time, says Udle.

"It's never too early to get the word out and have your plans take shape," she says. "Those final days before a big event are a blur, with so many last-minute pieces coming together and fires to put out." 💡

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