

Bower Power Papers

EVENTS: YOUR MESSAGE IN 3-D

By Gail S. Bower

Driving through Philadelphia the week before the Big Day 2005—yes, the Philadelphia Eagles' first SuperBowl in decades—you might have wondered why there was such a run on green lighting. Christmas was over, and it was too early for St. Patrick's Day. Yet everywhere you looked, you'd see a green library, green-capped skyscrapers, a green city hall, green bridges. Then you'd remember: "Go Eagles!"

Events have the special power of building excitement, unifying a community, and rallying individuals around a greater cause. You can run a radio spot, issue a press release, or launch a web site, but there is nothing like an event to convey your message three-dimensionally and to offer your clients, customers, or constituency a true experience of your organization—and generate team spirit.

Yes, it's true, the Eagles and the NFL have quite a following, not to mention a hefty budget. But every popular event had its early days. The joke around the offices of the producers of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, the largest multi-stage music festival in the country now nearing its 40s, is that at the first festival, there were more musicians than festivalgoers!

So what makes an event a success? How can you launch an event that will have a good chance of longevity as well as excitement in its first year? How can you ensure that your event delivers your message?

What's the point?

It all starts with clarifying the purpose for your event as well as the target audience. Is the event a fundraiser or friend-raiser? Is it a celebration or a promotion? Should it be fun or serious, private or public, inclusive or exclusive? How do you want your audience to be affected and changed as a result of your event?

As you clarify the event's goals, identify who your audience is or how you can involve many audiences. For example, if the event honors your constituency, but you also wish to interact with funders, how can you do both? A private reception for funders before the constituency event might work and provide the added, intangible benefit of helping funders witness firsthand your organization's successes, needs, and challenges.

Organizing energies

As the event begins to take shape with an appropriate venue, date, time, programming or entertainment, logistics and details, you begin to market and promote your event. From save-the-date cards to mentions in your newsletter, posters and PSAs to ads and announcements, all your materials must convey key information about your event, build a call to action, and educate readers.

And don't forget a message about your organization. Though only 100 or 200 or even 1,000 people may attend your event, many more will learn about your event through marketing efforts. Seize that opportunity to educate them about your goals and mission. The very event itself should communicate and reflect that information. The marketing materials cannot be too explicit.

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Once the word gets out there, a buzz begins. That's the sound of energies aligning around that event, your message, your purpose, and the importance of your event. For example, receiving invitations to anniversary events causes the invitee to pause and reflect on the organization, its history, its achievements, and reinforce his or her association with the event or the cause.

Show Time

Then comes event day. Attendees interact with your staff, board, and each other. They're entertained and educated. They cheer, they cry, they learn, they're moved. The experience unifies them with others, and they venture out of the event and into the world somehow changed and uplifted. Go, Team!

(648 words)

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