

Best Practices for Preparing Honorees

By Daniel Lindley

Congratulations. You've found the perfect honoree for your event. Now lay down some ground rules and employ some best practices to properly prepare him or her to maximize success for your group and the honoree, advises Hillary Needle, president, Hillary Needle Events (Dix Hills, NY).

"You have to explain to the honoree that this recognition is not just about showing up and getting a plaque," Needle says. "You have to establish your expectations."

Needle suggests using an "honoree contract" that fully explains what you expect of each person your group has chosen to honor. Honorees should sign the contract and return it to you, acknowledging they have read it and that they understand it and their obligations to your organization.

Besides basics like the event's date, time and location, the contract should detail crucial components, including:

- Your group's mission and whether the event will benefit your entire organization or a specific program.
- The honoree's minimum financial commitment, which usually will be at the highest sponsorship level.
- A request for a designated liaison from the honoree's company or group who will become part of the planning committee to keep the honoree "dialed in" to progress and planning for the event.
- Expectations of the honoree in promoting the event to friends, family and business associates through social media, the Internet and other means. If honorees can't do that themselves, they need to provide your group a list of their contacts.

Needle likes to give her clients' honorees a "toolbox" that includes sample ask letters, electronic and print invitations, press releases and other material they can use to help make the event successful.

But "even if you've checked all the boxes and done due diligence, it doesn't always come to pass that an honoree is successful," she adds.

That's why it's wise to include multiple honoree categories for any event, such as an "outstanding corporate citizen" or an "outstanding volunteer." Having a "multitiered honoree slate shares the burden of fundraising and increases your opportunity to make your financial goal," Needle says.

Source: Hillary Needle, President, Hillary Needle Events, Dix Hills, NY. Phone (516) 993-4056. E-mail: Hillary@HillaryNeedleEvents.com. Website: <http://www.hillaryneedleevents.com/>

Breathe New Life Into Your Signature Events

By Megan Venzin

Just because an event has lost some luster doesn't mean it needs to be removed from the schedule. Reimagining your organization's stalwart gatherings will keep old fans happy and entice newcomers.

Last year, the University of Richmond (Richmond, VA) successfully unveiled a series of new and improved events to better connect with alumni. At the helm of this transformation was Olivia Wolfson, associate director for campus events and volunteer engagement, who says an early assessment helped the institution determine how to utilize readily available resources on campus, instead of spending time and money to hire out novel projects.

"For example, one of the biggest events we revamped was our reunion weekend picnic, which we decided to host inside of our dining hall instead of renting a very costly tent to be placed outside in the humid summer weather," Wolfson explains. "This was a small but very impactful change that the alumni loved. We were able to save money, time and logistical stresses all while making the event better and more exciting."

Homecoming weekend was the next tradition to get a facelift. With a goal to make the weekend feel "more festive," Wolfson's team launched a new signature event called Party Under the Lights at the Greek Theatre, which brought alumni to the campus's most nostalgic locations. "In spending the money and implementing this new event, we are hoping to have year over year attendance increase," Wolfson says.

Here Wolfson offers tips to help nonprofits elevate and breathe new life into their signature events:

1. **Conduct an assessment.** Ask yourself these questions: What events are not worth the time/money? Can processes be streamlined to help all involved? Is there a way to redistribute the budget to create something new and exciting?
2. **"Work smarter, not harder."** "Guests of events do not like to see the same exact thing year over year, so changes will need to be made to appeal to a wide audience," Wolfson adds. "Sometimes the smallest changes can create the biggest impact and totally revamp an event into something you were unable to picture before." Instead of investing money in costly rentals, add-ons, etc., make use of the resources and locations you already have.
3. **Get campus buy-in.** Wolfson's team met with campus partners before launching their new homecoming weekend events. This helped them identify key locations and aspects of the event that were important to attendees.
4. **Create exciting promotional material.** "In order to reach many alumni about homecoming and reunion weekends and the exciting changes we had implemented for each, we launched large social media campaigns via our Facebook and IG pages," Wolfson shares. "IG stories were very helpful in recruiting our younger alumni to spread the word." Using images that demonstrated the event's fresh appearance helped create buzz.
5. **Use trusted vendors.** "We used trusted vendors with whom we had existing relationships, which helped us secure discounts and bring our vision to life," Wolfson explains.

Source: Olivia Wolfson, Associate Director, Campus Events and Volunteer Engagement, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA. Phone (804) 289-8352. E-mail: owolfson@richmond.edu. Website: www.richmond.edu