

BEST PRACTICES GUIDE | EVENT MARKETING

Make the Most of Event Marketing for Your Nonprofit

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As a nonprofit organization, you may have limited resources for setting up and putting on an event that benefits your members or donors and your organization. But limited resources do not mean limited options when it comes to creating pre-event buzz and post-event follow-up.

Combining the resources of Event Marketing, Email Marketing, and Online Survey, you can easily engage potential attendees, compel them to register for your event, and solicit post-event feedback through the Constant Contact interface. This guide will show you how to schedule your event, send email Save the Dates and invitations to prospective attendees, build buzz through your newsletters, and create a central repository for all event-related information.

Once the event is over, the work is not done. We'll show you how to use Email Marketing and Online Survey to follow-up with attendees and no-shows to gather feedback that will make your next event even better.

1. Consider your audience/attendees when scheduling your event.

As you look at the calendar to figure out a date and time for your event, consider who you will be inviting and what time might work best for them. For example, holding an event for working mothers and scheduling it between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. might make it difficult to reach those moms who actually work.

Hosting an event when your key audience cannot attend is a waste of time and money. How about conducting a pre-event poll or survey to determine your audience's interest in your event and their availability? Then you can determine when the best day and time to host your event would be.

In addition, a local community calendar can help in two ways. First, it can alert you to any competing events that might draw your customers away from your gathering.

Second, you can use the community calendar to piggy back off major events — a town parade, for example. If you have a physical location adjacent to the parade route, it might be a perfect time to invite the community in to see what you have to offer.

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2. Have two clear goals for the event: what you hope to accomplish and what you hope your guests accomplish.

As you plan your event, keep two simple goals in mind: What you want to get out of it and, just as important, what you hope your attendees will get out of it by being there. The goal of a thrift store's open house is to increase foot traffic to the location. But what does the customer get out of it? Make sure to offer them an incentive to come, such as discounts, door prizes, or giveaways — in addition to the affordable merchandise, of course.

For a charitable event, the goal is to raise awareness and/or money for your organization. Make it clear to attendees how they will be helping your cause and how they may benefit too (their donation is tax-deductible, for example).

3. Send a Save the Date email.

You're a busy person. Your potential attendees are busy people too. Get your event on their calendar early by sending a Save the Date email. You might not have all the specifics of the event set, but once the date and time are nailed down, let people know about them.

This is particularly important if your event falls during a competitive time of year, like major holidays. Waiting until the actual invite goes out to let people know about your event might lead to a lot of "regret" RSVPs.

4. Send a personalized invitation — don't just put event info on your website.

Announcing only on your website that you're having an event might not drive many signups. After all, it's unlikely that people will just stumble upon the information and feel compelled to go.

Take the proactive approach in attracting potential attendees by sending them a personal email invitation. It's a good feeling when you're invited to a "special event." Make your customers feel wanted by sending them a finely crafted message that refers to them by name, not just by an email address. Dave Smith will feel more of a personal connection from a "Dear Dave" invite than a "Dear dsmith@mail.com" or a generic "Hi there" salutation.

Note: Don't use names in the subject line of the email as your invite may run afoul of aggressive spam filters. Use terms such as "you" and "your" instead ("You are invited," for example), which keeps the personal feel you're aiming for while avoiding a spam trap.

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5. Get to the details of the event quickly.

Like the main tenets of good journalism, your invite and event homepage should contain the What, Where, When, and Why information about your event right up top. Invitees should be given a brief description of the event and its purpose, along with the date and time. Make sure to give those you're inviting a reason to attend: "Help raise money for an important cause while enjoying fine local cuisine," for example.

The goal of the concise and compelling What, Where, When, and Why information is to make it as easy as possible for the invitee to say, "Yes, I want to (and can) attend this event." Ensure that your call to action — "Sign up for our event now" — is well placed on the invite to drive people straight to your registration page once they've made up their mind to attend.

6. Use a good subject line for your invitation email.

First impressions are the most important, so that means the subject line of your invitation email is critical for your event. Make sure it's personal and ensure that your cause is well represented.

If you're having a charitable event, something along the lines of "The Park City Symphony needs your help" might draw in fans with a personal plea to help an institution they care about. If it's an event with limited availability, using a number in your headline such as "Only 4 tables left at our Park City Symphony charity dinner" demonstrates scarcity and compels people to act quickly.

The invitation subject line might be the only chance you have to make an impression, so make it a good one!

7. Use social media websites to promote your event.

No matter what kind of event you're hosting, posting regularly on your Facebook fan page, in your Twitter feed, or on another social media site will help to build interest in the event. Announce a new speaker or a change to your program, put the spotlight on a new sponsor who will be offering discounted offerings during the event, count down the days until the event, give updates about how many people have signed up to attend or how much money has already been raised, present interesting facts about your cause . . . the more you share, the more excited people will be to attend.

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If you “brand” your tweets by adding a distinctive hashtag (i.e., a quick phrase preceded by the pound sign — such as #centerbbq), it will encourage others to do the same, and then you’ll create a community of attendees before, during, and after the event.

Promoting your event on social media websites also spreads the word beyond those who have already been invited. This can increase your attendance and get even more people interested in your activities.

8. Make sure all information on your event homepage is accurate and up-to-date.

Keeping up-to-date information in a central location such as your event homepage will help answer attendee questions without making you do extra work. Would you rather be spending time giving directions to your event over the phone or working to create the best possible experience for event attendees?

Make sure the date, time, location, and directions are included, as well as any other pertinent information, such as appropriate dress (Black Tie Only) and methods of payments accepted (if you will be selling or auctioning items). Attendees should be able to get all the basic information necessary to attend your event from the homepage.

9. Include a “Join My Mailing List” box on the event homepage.

This is especially important if attendees are not already on your regular mailing list. Tell them that in addition to hosting great events, you also have a regular newsletter. Your “Join My Mailing List” box will then allow you to keep the conversation going long after the event is over.

10. Remind customers about your event.

The Save the Date email has been sent, the invite is out, and attendees are signed up to come to your event. Don’t stop there. Put reminders and links to your event homepage in your regular email newsletter.

This serves two purposes: It reminds signed-up attendees of the date, keeping it top-of-mind while building anticipation, and serves as an advertisement for those who may not have been on your contact list when you sent out the invitations. Adding teasers about the event can help build the attendee buzz as well.

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11. After the event, send timely follow-up communications.

The event is over and everyone had a good time. Your job is done, right? Not yet. Make sure to send out a post-event communication to both attendees and no-shows. It might be helpful to segment your list ahead of time for easier targeting of these two groups.

You can thank those who made it to the event and provide any additional follow-up information, such as links to relevant presentations and photos of the event. You can also include a link to a post-event survey so you can get feedback on how successful it was for attendees (see number 12).

For those who missed the event, say you're sorry they couldn't make it and include similar follow-up information, like presentation links and photos.

Regardless of your audience, if your event is regularly scheduled, include a link to the next scheduled event's homepage. (You can schedule events in Constant Contact Event Marketing up to a year in advance.)

12. Seek feedback after the event in the form of a survey.

As part of your post-event follow-up, include a link to a short survey to gauge attendees' thoughts. Keep the survey short with questions relevant to the objectives of the event and its success.

Make sure to have at least one open-ended text box that allows attendees to express all their opinions without having to conform to a few checkboxes. Verbatim answers can provide some of the best material for measuring success and gathering constructive criticism. The ultimate goal is to figure out what worked well and what can be done better to make the next event all that much more rewarding for both you and your customers.

In addition, you can use any positive comments from attendees to help promote your next event. (Just make sure you get these people's permission before you use their quotes.)

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13. Follow up with any unsatisfied participants.

Constructive criticism from unsatisfied customers can be an excellent way to build future successful events and turn an unhappy customer into a happy one. Remember, happy customers will tell a few people about their experience. Unhappy customers will tell a lot more people about their dissatisfaction.

Get in front of those unhappy types to find out what disappointed them about your event, and use that information to make future events more positive experiences. Thanking them for their honesty will show you care about their feelings and how they affect your organization.

14. Post event highlights in the next issue of your newsletter

In a subsequent issue of your newsletter, post highlights of your event as part of the content. Photos, links, and even quotes from your follow-up survey will help set expectations and build buzz for the next event. People will be warmly reminded of the great time they had and those who couldn't make the event will see what they missed, hopefully making them more likely to attend a future event.

15. Update your event homepage after the event is over

The event homepage lives for 30 days after your event ends. Use it to its full potential by adding links to presentations and other information for those attendees that keep visiting the site. You made the homepage a central landing place pre-event, so keep it a central location post-event, making it easy for your customers to find the information they are looking for.

This is also a great place to add a link to the next event's homepage, if available. Would-be attendees who missed the first event will be happy to see there's another upcoming opportunity.

Now you should be ready to execute your own event plan. By applying these best practices, you'll ensure success and satisfaction, and will position your organization to grow even more.