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An Inside Look into Event Planning

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An Inside Look into Event Planning

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ABSTRACT

This paper will summarize the planning process, methods, and results of a local Ellensburg, Washington event and student project, “Mickey’s Countdown to Christmas.” This event was a fundraiser taking place during the holiday season, where the goal was to raise money for the Ellensburg High School Band (EHS). The EHS Band takes a biannual educational trip to The Disneyland Resort, and as over 100 kids want to go in the year 2020, it has become an expensive endeavor. The hope for the fundraiser was to raise some extra money that could be deposited directly into student accounts, so that more students would be able to attend the trip. This paper not only speaks to the fundraiser and the successes, failures, and key takeaways, but also speaks to event planning and fundraising as a whole; including best practices and why fundraising is so important. Overall, this paper is meant to highlight a large event project and also go more in depth on the challenging, unpredictable, and exciting process that is planning an event.

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The Importance of Fundraising

For years, fundraising, or “the seeking of financial support for a charity, cause, or other enterprise,” has been a popular way to socialize, market, and obtain income for an important goal. Although raising money is the end objective, more than that, fundraising brings people together to celebrate and get excited about a common cause. In her article “Why Fundraising Events Are About More Than Money,” marketing manager Tess Srebo dives into the concepts of fundraising and why it goes deeper than cash.

According to Srebo, only eighteen percent of nonprofits do not have major fundraising events. This statistic proves that not only does fundraising work, but also that people find success in big event fundraisers. Srebo points out that securing relationships at these fundraising events and spreading awareness for the cause is crucial to a successful fundraising event. This can lead to long term sponsors, loyalty, and support towards the cause. She also adds that, “incorporating volunteers into your events is a great way to make the most of this relationship building potential” and explores this idea in her following remarks (Srebo, 2015).

Loyal and committed volunteers can be difficult to find for any event, which is why Srebo stresses the importance of taking advantage of these fundraisers to build relationships, or a volunteer basis. She brings up some important points, stating that attendees who come to one event can sometimes become the cause’s most dedicated supporters and volunteers. This is why it is important to build these positive first impressions. Not everyone loves to volunteer, but many love to showcase their skills. According to Srebo, ninety-seven percent of millennials like to volunteer by incorporating their strengths. Taking advantage of people’s skill sets is a better way to gain volunteers who are more confident, passionate, and excited to help (Srebo, 2015).

While Tess Srebo established the importance of fundraising in building relationships and establishing a volunteer basis, small business advocate and entrepreneur Devon Reeser looks at nonprofit organizations (NPO) directly and how they grow and change because of fundraisers. One way fundraising positively impacts NPOs is that it makes nonprofits take a step back and reanalyze finances, staffing, the future, etc. Goals, planning, and steps to achieve such goals are often considered as well. These factors are important to know about for a fundraiser, but it also helps a business or organization to see areas of weakness that need strengthening or special attention (Reeser, 2019).

Reeser also comments on a similar concept that Srebo touches on, and that is that fundraising drives NPOs to reach out and make community connections. When it comes to fundraising, especially with NPOs, it is ideal to spend very little, if any, personal cash. For this reason, marketing and reaching out to as many businesses as possible will help NPOs save the most money and have the most success. Gaining sponsors, donations, grants, and partners will help the organization or business be more sustainable overall (Reeser, 2019).

Reeser brings up a final and interesting point. She comments on how nonprofit organizations, in order to best succeed and receive the most support, should target local issues. The more personally the cause affects local businesses and community members, the more people will be interested in volunteering, contributing, attending, or getting involved. Not only will this get more support for the cause, but it will also improve the local community as a whole (Reeser, 2019).

Overall, fundraising is important. The act of fundraising helps secure relationships, market the fundraising cause, improve the community, help the organization improve themselves

as a whole, and many other positive developments. Although fundraising is a great way to bring in money for a cause, if executed well, fundraising can do a lot more for an organization.

Some Fundamentals of Event Planning

Event planning is a fast paced, exciting, and unpredictable job. Many elements need to come together in order to pull off a successful event; and for an event planner, this can be extremely challenging and somewhat terrifying. With all that this career can bring, the more knowledge an event worker has, the better. The best way to gain wisdom in this field is of course experience, but there are some fundamentals that every event planner should know before walking into the ambitious and exhilarating task of planning an event.

Melanie Woodward (2019), creator of the “Event Planning Blueprint,” describes what she uses for her event planning checklist. She first discusses the importance of contracts. When it comes to events, it is crucial that legal requirements are met. Food, alcoholic beverages, time of day, or even the amount of noise that may be produced may require additional permits or contracts. Woodward stresses the significance of making sure every contract is read, signed, and that a copy is in the hands of all necessary parties involved (Woodward, 2019).

One of the most important aspects of an event is the venue. It is paramount to know the price for the budget, any venue restrictions, how the venue will work with the set-up of the event, etc. The more everyone involved knows about the venue beforehand, the easier the planning process will be. Woodward advises the planner to take a tour of the venue with the client and the vendors. This way everyone can agree on set up and have the same vision, as well as address any questions or concerns (Woodward, 2019).

One more piece of advice Woodward gives to help make the planning process smoother is to not be afraid to double check everything. People often over book, change their minds about

something, or even forget, so it is wise to reconfirm event details. With many involved in an event from the attendees to the vendors, Woodward suggests reconfirming the venue and the time with all involved and even getting it in writing or within a contract to make sure everyone is agreed. Woodward also advises always hiring extra staff or recruiting extra volunteers. The more experience and training the staff have of course too, the better. She then adds to follow up and remind staff, vendors, caterers, potential attendees, etc. to keep everyone on schedule and prepared for the event.

There are many components that go into planning an event. An event planner must be persistent, diligent, and detail oriented. Leading up to an event, plans and arrangements can often seem scattered. Making sure all legal documents are signed and obtained, having the most ideal venue set and agreed upon, as well as reconfirming all of the important details are just a few of the many steps to make this process as smooth as possible. Checklists are one way to lessen the chaos leading up to and on the day of the event and implementing Woodward's tools within your checklist will also help increase the potential for success.

Mickey's Countdown to Christmas 2019

The principles listed above were utilized in the planning and coordinating of "Mickey's Countdown to Christmas", a fundraiser for the Ellensburg High School Band. Ellensburg High School, or EHS, is located in the heart of the small town of Ellensburg in Central Washington. This school averages just under a thousand students total, many of whom are involved in various extracurricular activities. Theatre, choir, football, mechanical engineering, and cheerleading are just a few of the many opportunities for learning that this school has to offer. One of the more unique but popular ways to get involved with school spirit is to join the EHS Band.

The EHS Band, currently directed by Robbie Rutherford, is continually looking for ways to learn and improve. One way that students were able to grow musically was through a tradition started years ago by previous beloved band director Don May, who left EHS at the end of 2018. This tradition was that every other year, the EHS Band would take a trip to Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, California. Here they would have the opportunity to learn Disney soundtrack music from experienced Disney musicians, record as a band in a Disney recording studio, and perform live at the Disneyland parks. Looking forward to this experience excites and encourages band students every year.

Although a lot of planning goes into this trip from the band director, the parent group, and the students, the main issue that occurs for many families is affordability. Disneyland can be expensive for many families, and parents feel that it is not fair that financial status is the deciding factor of who gets to attend the trip. That is why this past year, parents wanted try a different approach. According to the EHS Band Parent Group, previous fundraisers included selling Otis Spunk Meyer cookies and selling tickets to various sports games. These mini fundraisers brought in very little income. The more parents talked, the better the idea of a large event fundraiser sounded. The only problem was, nobody had the time to take on such an event.

When a few members of the Band Parent Group approached me, I did not know where to begin. No one had an outline for the event, since this was the first time it would be done. I was told they wanted it to be in December around Christmas time, preferably taking place the same night and location as a band concert, and I was given a \$500 budget. Other than that, I was on my own. I decided that although the fundraiser would be Christmas themed, I also wanted Disney elements incorporated to get attendees excited about the trip. The parents liked my idea, and the name “Mickey’s Countdown to Christmas” made the event official.

Methods

This particular fundraiser was volunteer run, so my methods were different compared to some events I have assisted with. Leading up to the event, I needed to market the event, gather supplies, and solicit volunteers. To market the event, I created a poster and printed 60 to put up all over town. I also contacted KXLE radio, and since this was a nonprofit event, they agreed to do a free public service announcement on the radio. I also contacted the Daily Record, who were very kind in writing an article regarding the fundraiser for free. I also created a Facebook event, which had over 100 responses on it by the day of the event.

The toughest part of this event was gathering supplies. The budget for this event was low, \$500 for a large-scale event, so I was asked to get as many materials donated as possible from local businesses. Almost daily, I approached a different business and asked them to donate a certain material, auction item, or food item. Although it was a difficult time of year for many businesses, most were very kind and generous and very willing to help. Only a few businesses of the many I asked turned me down. I made sure that the EHS Band sent thank you cards to the businesses who donated after the event was over.

Finding volunteers was also difficult because most of my options for volunteers were busy high school parents. To solicit volunteers, I first spoke at one of the EHS band concerts and asked for help. I also brought two EHS band alumni with me who spoke to their experiences at Disney and the importance that this trip had on their education. Additionally, I made a flyer for the band concert program with the event information and my contact information on it. I also

created a sign-up genius where parents and students could sign up to volunteer, and I posted it to the Band Parent Group Facebook page.

Results

Although planning this event could be considered chaotic, parents and students came together on event day to help pull everything together successfully. We utilized the entirety of the Morgan Middle School entryway. I had a registration table set up right at the entrance to the school, so people could purchase tickets. On the left side of the school entry way, we had about 15 tables set up solely for auction items. Every table was full of silent auction bid sheets and baskets pulled together from local businesses in town. On the auction side I also had desserts available for purchase and a few high school band members who volunteered to play some Christmas music during the event. On the right side of the school upon walking in, we had a hot chocolate and coffee vendor, a chili and cornbread vendor, a cookie decorating station, two large tables with various crafts for both children and adults, a gift-wrapping station, and at the far end, there was a place to take pictures with Santa. Some pictures from the event are shown below:



Some of the silent auction items donated by local businesses we had available at the event



A Disney's Avengers piece made specifically for our fundraiser and donated by local artist Caleb Rudd



Our dessert table had a large variety of treats for purchases from different local businesses



EHS Band kids who volunteered to play Christmas music at the fundraiser



Greg hard at work running our coffee and hot chocolate stand



Attendees decorating and eating cookies at the cookie decorating station



One of our two craft tables ready for attendees



Attendees helping themselves to chili and cornbread with student volunteers supervising

Overall, the event was a success. We had a steady stream of attendees throughout the entire duration of the fundraiser, and everyone left full and happy. Every single auction item was sold and went home with somebody, which was definitely the fundraiser's biggest source of income. Parents, students, and attendees overall repeated positive feedback for the event. At a follow up meeting, the Band Parent Group President announced that the fundraiser brought in over \$3,500 profit, which would all be put towards Disneyland expenses.

Key Takeaways

Because for the majority of this fundraiser I was on my own, this project was a perfect opportunity to learn more about myself, nonprofit fundraising, and the event planning world. Although in the end this event was considered successful, there were many struggles along the way and on the day of. Had I known what I currently know, I would have approached many

situations differently. Fortunately, for an event planner, this does not necessarily mean a failed event, but often a way to improve future events.

One thing I learned that I could not have changed for this particular event but would consider changing for future events is asking for local businesses for support during the holidays. When planning a fundraiser that happens during the holiday season, the earlier into the season that event coordinators can start soliciting for donations, the better. Especially in a small town, small businesses struggle a little more during the holidays as business can be slower. Additionally, businesses are already being slammed with asks from various nonprofits. Many businesses were very supportive of my fundraiser, but many businesses also said that they had already donated so much to various other organizations and could not afford to donate more, or said they wished they could donate more but they just could not afford to contribute much at the time. Overall, if I plan a fundraiser in the future, I will try and avoid having it take place during the holiday season, if possible, to be courteous to the businesses and people that I am depending on for support.

Second, I realized the importance of delegation. I was told at the beginning that I was in charge and that I would be making the decisions. Although I did make the end decisions, there were many mothers who put themselves in leadership roles and information was miscommunicated. People got their feelings hurt because sometimes I would have to say no after she had been told yes by someone else, or I would delegate a task to one person and then another woman would get upset because someone else delegated the same task to her. Feelings being hurt led to miscommunication, cliques forming, and gossip being distributed amongst the women, and this was by far the most stressful, frustrating, and honestly disappointing piece of this project.

One way that I myself can improve as a future event planner would be to stay firm on what I decide early on. As I realized, making changes on the day of the event just to appease someone unless absolutely necessary just adds stress and chaos. Oftentimes, the outcome is worse than it would have been originally. I was trying so hard to make every parent happy that I made a couple changes on the event day that I did not really feel made sense, but I was being pressured to make the changes. I realized quickly after making a couple of these changes that I was right in my initial plans, so I had to change the plans back. This just added more stress onto my plate, though the attendees were happier after I switched the changes back to my original plans.

In conclusion, this project was very time consuming and involved many challenges; however, I learned a multitude about myself and about the nonprofit events industry. I am overall very glad I had this experience, as I believe not many students my age entering the event planning world can say she or he single handedly coordinated a fundraiser for a school district. There were many difficulties that one faces with a nonprofit that would not occur with a corporate organization or as an independent planner. I enjoy having a larger budget where I do not have to depend on community members for the success of my event. Although I love nonprofit organizations and what they do for the community, I think I may avoid working with them in the future.

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