

## Recipe for a Fundraising House Party

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Fundraising can be a daunting task. Many in the non-profit sector worry about where to go for the support they need. Complaints I often hear are:

- I don't know where to start
- I don't know any rich people
- I feel weird asking for money
- I feel like I need to give something in exchange for a donation

But if you're like the typical non-profit employee, you have the means to raise a good amount of money and have a good time doing it. Why? Because you have two things that count the most: passion and relationships.

It's been shown over and over that the majority of funds donated in this country come from people who are NOT wealthy. Low income and middle-class folks give a larger percentage of their income than do wealthy individuals. You don't necessarily need people to give a lot, if you can get a lot of people to give.

One excellent way to make the process of asking easier- and even fun and energizing- is to throw a fundraising House Party.

### ***What is a House Party?***

In this context, a House Party is a social occasion organized for a specific purpose: to raise funds AND long-term relationships for a specific organization. Both goals are important. You are not just going to ask people to give you cash. You are going to have a chance to tell people exactly why you are passionate about this work, and give them the opportunity to help you make something happen. That help can come in the form of money, introductions to other people, volunteering, willingness to become a board member, help in spreading the word about your work, donating needed items, or throwing their own House Party to support your work.

Think of the House Party as a first step in a long and happy friendship between your organization and your guests, or- if you already have a relationship- a chance to check in and make that relationship stronger.

## ***Beginning to Begin***

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A few things to line up before you invite your guests:

### **Location, location, location**

Find a good venue for your party. It should have enough room to comfortably fit your guests. Comfortable means not too small, but also not too big! Even though we're calling this a "House Party" it doesn't have to take place in someone's home. You could choose a back room of a restaurant or café, a friend's bar during slow hours, an art gallery- get creative.

### **Host Committee**

While it is possible to do everything yourself, that's no fun! Plus, with a small group of supportive folks, you have access to a larger number of potential guests. Invite folks to be part of the host committee who know a lot of people who are interested in the kind of work you do. If you can manage it, gather a host committee comprised of people who your invitees will want to meet for intellectual, social or professional reasons. Think about your mission and your network... who are those "minor celebrities" in your field who are sympathetic to your work.

### **Set the fundraising goal**

Know how much you want to raise at this event. This will provide a good compass for who to invite and how large an event you need to plan. Be realistic, but don't be afraid to stretch.

### **Find a matching gift or other incentives for people to give bigger**

Before your event, do some digging around your network and see if you can find someone who is willing to match the contributions you make. Perhaps one of your board members or major donors who is already planning on giving at some point during the year could be convinced to leverage his or her gift to increase contributions by others. Or even better, find a local business to sponsor the event with a matching gift. Have a representative of the matching entity come to the event and tell your guests why they've decided to make this investment.

Sometimes it is easier to find in-kind donations that are free to the organization, but provide good incentives for guests to give at a higher level than they might otherwise. Magazine subscriptions, tickets, coupons and gift certificates, DVDs and music all make good low-cost incentives that small businesses are more easily able to donate. Try to find items that reinforce your mission message.

## ***The Invitation***

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### **Invitation list**

Get each member of your committee, including you, to sit down and think about 15 to 20 people they know who care about the kind of work you do or are otherwise sympathetic. You will probably have to invite 2 to 4 times the number of people as you want to actually attend. Be sure there is a good mix of new people and people who already know about your work. This will ensure that there is good conversation and some of your guests will be able to advocate on your behalf at the party.

### **What to include in the invitation**

A good invitation sets the tone for the event. If there is a theme to the evening, make sure you reflect it in the invitation. Think about why your guests might be motivated to come to the party, and write the invitation to emphasize those points. Are people interested in getting involved in a cause they've heard a lot about? Do they want to learn more about your organization in particular? Are they interested in meeting like-minded people or networking with other folks in the field? Is there something in the news that relates to what you are doing to make it seem timely and relevant? Make the event sound fun and interesting, and add the names of your host committee and their affiliations so people know that there will be interesting people there. Be sure to encourage them to bring friends.

Don't forget the obvious, like the date and time of the event, the venue location, address, home phone, and email. If you serve food, you should definitely say so! People love free food. You might also ask if people have special needs like allergies or vegetarian diets.

What ever you do, DEFINITELY let people know ahead of time that this is a fundraising event and that they should bring their check book. If you forget that part, people will feel cornered and might be mad at you. If you let people know ahead of time that you are asking them for money, people who don't want to be asked will self-select out. It will take the pressure off of you and ensure that you have a receptive audience.

### **How to send your invitation**

It is good to send the invitations a few different routes so that people pay attention. Everyone loves mail, and if you have the time and budget to send your invite by mail, that's great. It adds a personal touch, which people appreciate and respond to in an age of ubiquitous email. If you go this route, you want to be sure to follow up with people you don't hear from after a week or

two using another method. If you're pressed for time and cash, the cheapest and easiest way to publicize the event is via the internet. I strongly recommend an evite, as it will allow people to easily RSVP and invite others to come with them. You can do some follow up with email, including extra information that might get people thinking about the cause. Be sure to send out a reminder a week before the event to folks who haven't RSVP'd. A personal phone call will be the most effective way to get people to attend. Don't hassle people, but if you know them, be sure to let them know that this is something that means a lot to you and you'd like them to come if they can.

Be sure to send the invitations out with plenty of lead time- 3 to 4 weeks at least- to get it on their calendars. Be sure to do follow up to make sure people don't forget.

## ***Publicity***

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Since you want to get new people involved in the organization, consider promoting the event beyond the circle of you and your host committee. Post the event on craigslist and other online event calendars, post flyers in your neighborhood cafes, use your online social networks and ask your friends to re-post so it reaches the broadest possible network. You can also do a quick press release to see if you can't get someone from the local paper to cover your issue and build some awareness. This will work particularly well if you can tie it in to a recent news story.

## ***Plan the Party***

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Most people don't need to be told how to host a party. Let it be said that people will be more likely to show up if you let them know there will be food. Keep it simple or aim to impress... it's your call. If you aren't doing a sit-down dinner, try to do finger food that people can hold while they mingle. Be sure to include some veggie options. You can keep your costs down by getting local grocers or restaurants to donate food or beverages, or have the host committee split the bill.

It is a good idea to have a friendly and outgoing person stationed at the door to greet visitors and let them know where they can put their things and get some food. Have the host committee be sure no one is stuck in the corner not talking to anyone. Make sure to introduce people who don't know each other. Set up a registration table so people can sign in and get a name tag.

It's good to have someone on hand to take photos and document the event. You can add these to your website or put them in a newsletter to help raise awareness of your fundraising efforts, and recognize people for showing up to the event.

## ***The House Party Agenda***

Think through the evening from beginning to end and put together a schedule of what should happen when. The following format might be helpful:

Activity	Start time	End time	Who?
Set up food, info table	5pm	5:30	Ed & Sally
Guests arrive, mingle and snack. Nancy greets at door, Ed & Sally make people comfortable	5:30	6:00	Nancy, Ed & Sally
People gather in living room for presentation	6:00	6:05	Ed
Welcome remarks- why I got involved, introduce the issue/need/ testify about the quality of the org's work & it's impact	6:05	6:08	Sally
More about the need, briefly why org was started, what is the larger vision	6:08	6:13	Ed
Info about programs and activities and accomplishments	6:13	6:17	Nancy
Short video documentary about work/testimonial	6:17	6:24	
Ways people can get involved- volunteering, promoting, throwing a houseparty, etc	6:24	6:26	Nancy
Hand out donation envelopes & make the ask. Announce Matching gift and free magazine subscription with every gift over \$50, Thank everyone for coming and pass the hat.	6:26	6:34	Sally
Mingle and clean up	6:34	Whenever	

Note that the program is relatively short- about 20 or 25 minutes tops including the video. Keep the presentation lively. You may want to invite people to save their questions until the end to keep the presentation on track. If so, be sure you can stick around long enough to talk to people afterwards.

Tailor the style and flow of the presentation to match the disposition of your audience and the gravity of the issue you are raising funds for. If you're raising money to fight genocide in Darfur, the tone will be different than if you're raising money for a theater group. Talk to your guests in their own language, and be familiar. Try to engage your audience using both hard facts and compelling stories that get people riled up or tug on the heartstrings a little bit. If you can make them cry, you'll definitely get them to write a check.

## ***Collecting info and follow up***

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Make sure that you pass around a sign-up sheet and ask people if you can add them to your mailing list, and ask them if you can give them a call to get their feedback on the event. If they say yes, do it within one or two days (a week max) before they forget about you. In the follow up phone call, ask them what they thought (keep it that open ended), if they could see themselves getting more involved and how, if they know of anyone else who should see the presentation you presented to them, and ask if you can use their name to contact those people.

Send out a general email to everyone who attended to thank them for coming and announce how much you raised. Direct them to the organization's website and encourage them to get more involved. Tell them that if anyone would be interested in throwing their own house party to support the cause, you'd be happy to give them some resources (like this article).

Try to send formal acknowledgement letters to donors within 1 to 2 weeks. The sooner the better. Think about including some notes about poignant conversations that came up during the event or photos of participants. Invite them to some sort of organizational activity so they have next steps for staying involved. If you are a volunteer running the houseparty, you should give the names and addresses of donors to the organization as soon as possible so they can take care of this step.

## ***Keep in touch***

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The House Party is a great way to raise a little money, but the real value lies in meeting like-minded people in one place, and efficiently recruiting them as supporters for your organization. A one time check for \$50 is not as valueable as someone who will send you a \$20 check a couple times a year, and stay on your mailing list, forward info to friends, come to your events, volunteer, etc. Aim for the Long Term Relationship!