

Far More Than Flowers: Top Trends In Centerpieces
Exclusive: 13th Annual 50 Top Event Companies

SPECIAL EVENTS[®]

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COVER STORY

Fabulous FUNDRAISERS

What to tweak, what to keep for
successful fundraising galas

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Two from Tolo: From Tolo Events, the Gift of Health Gala (left) and Pittsburgh Heart Ball (right). Photos courtesy Tolo Events.

FUNDRAISING GALAS: KEEP IT OR CHANGE IT?

As the economy improves, producers of famed fundraising galas are facing a new challenge: What traditions do you honor and which do you tweak to keep the money flowing in? By Lisa Hurley

It's great to see beautiful people fill a beautiful ballroom. But if a fundraising gala doesn't hit its fundraising targets, the result isn't so pretty.

Over time, even the most successful fundraising galas must be tweaked to yield the results their sponsors require. Here, we ask four top gala planners what rules they always follow and what rules they break to make sure that funds keep flowing to worthy causes.

For the Pittsburgh Heart Ball, overseen by Shelly Tolo of Tolo Events, with offices in Pittsburgh

and Seattle, the color red is a given. "I always keep some element of red," she says. "You just have to—it's the American Heart Association."

For the Gift of Health Gala, guests "like to dress to the theme," Tolo says, "so choosing a theme that can translate to a specific costume for the evening is something we always keep in mind, and I'd never want that to change."

On the other hand, Tolo and team have implemented various tweaks to the Pittsburgh Heart Ball, including changing the orientation

of the ballroom to improve guest flow, switching from two small video screens to one large one, and dumping the silent auction for gaming activities.

"It's always great to keep guests guessing as to what to expect," Tolo says.

STICK WITH A WINNER

Merryl Brown, founder of Santa Barbara, Calif.-based Merry Brown Events, sticks with a winning formula for the Pacific Pride Foundation's Royal Ball.



“Based on my experience producing the Royal Ball, I would never change the format of this event; it is an evening-long cocktail party-style event with abundant bars, food stations that stay open for hours, followed by passed late-night bites,” Brown explains. “This event is about glamor, fun, decadence and uninhibited dancing—with no interruptions. We raise the bulk of our money before the event through sponsorships, underwriting and ticket sales. The only monetization that we do on the night of the party is a silent auction and a drawing, both of which we would also never change as they do very well, year after year, bringing in an additional \$100,000-plus in revenues.”

QUICK-CHANGE ARTIST

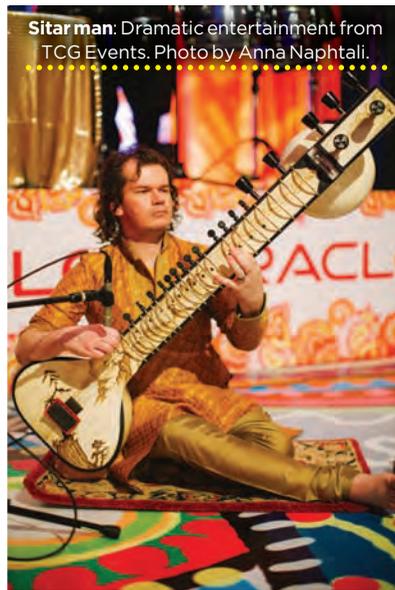
On the other hand, the team at TCG Events, based in Charlotte, N.C., which oversees the Make-A-Wish Annual Wish Ball, is always up for change for its fundraising galas.

“We never go into an event thinking any element is sacred,” says Cassie Brown, CSEP, TCG’s chief experience officer. “Events have a life cycle and can’t afford to have sacred cows.” The one exception: “The foundation of every great event is the logistics,” she says, “and that is sacred.”

“For example, we like a small service staff-to-guest ratio to avoid bar lines and messy rooms,” she explains. “The expectation of being surprised is also an element consistent to the events we plan—a must-



Red-hot event: The Pacific Pride Foundation Royal Ball from Merryll Brown Events (top left and right, above; also the cover). Photos by Isaac Hernandez.



Sitar man: Dramatic entertainment from TCG Events. Photo by Anna Naphtali.

have to keep guests coming back year after year.”

The TCG team isn’t afraid to switch things up. “We have changed dates, activities, dinner type, auction types and ticket price at various times,” Brown says. “One of our clients loved having an event the last Saturday in April each year, but the date became saturated with other events,” she notes. “This year, the event will be moved to several weeks earlier. A save-the-date went out, and we don’t expect any fallout.”

She adds, “Another client really wanted more networking time for attendees, so we moved them away from a three-course seated dinner to two courses followed by an interactive dessert experience.”

WHAT’S NEXT Cassie Brown says all fundraising efforts must be open to change.

“The organizations that understand that people are tired of the same old fundraising format and are willing to take some risk are seeing better revenues,” she says.

“The ALS ice bucket challenge is a perfect example,” she explains. “They would have never raised that kind of money or gotten that kind of exposure by doing the same old thing. Galas are still effective, but the ‘cocktails with silent auction, three-course dinner format’ is tiresome. The event should be different enough that attendees remember which event they were attending, instead of having it blend into the past social season.”

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