

## HOW TO THROW A KILLER GALA FOR \$342.61 OCTOBER 2011

As ioby's second annual benefit is just one week away, we have taken the opportunity to reflect on some lessons from last year's gala, and we decided to share them with you.

For those of you who came to ioby's First Benefit in November of last year, you remember that it was a great gathering of the nearly 300 people who have played a very important role in ioby's first full year at work. About a month after the event, I went back through all the receipts and assessed the budget versus actuals. I knew that we were going to come in very close to our target, but it was actually a little staggering how close we really came. Not including staff time\*, the value of our gala was \$31,975, but we only spent \$342.61 from our operating budget. It wasn't that hard to do, besides the actual value of the gala is priceless and there are many moments in an organization's growth when an event is appropriate and can be very beneficial.

### **Step 1. Buy the Cause Effective Special Events Toolbox.**

No, we're not getting paid by Cause Effective to promote their book. It really is that good. In fact, it's so good, I'm even going to tell you that it's worth every penny of the \$50 it cost us. The book came recommended to us in a workshop on special events planning led by NYCAHN and Dara Silverman. The Toolbox gives step-by-step instructions and samples from various event types, everything from a cocktail party to a film screening. There are sample budgets, invitations and timelines as well as lessons learned from combined decades of experience (my favorite: "Bring an extra pen. Someone will borrow it and not return it." It truly is the nuts and bolts of event planning and execution. Buy it.

### **Step 2. Know Your Objectives.**

As a brand new organization, we knew that our first objective of our first event had to be establishing ioby's name. Moreover, because we are a community-based organization that primarily works online, we wanted our event to be an opportunity to drive home that ioby is much, much more than just a website. Our second objective was to thank the many people who helped ioby get off the ground and specifically to spotlight the work of the project groups that we felt

exemplified ioby's mission. Our third objective was to raise funds, both for ioby's operations and for ioby projects. This is an important note. We wanted to do both in a way that was the simplest and the most engaging. We wanted to make sure people understood that our mission is very much about putting money in what you believe in. Not a lot of money, but just something to show you really care. Skin in the game, they say. Our fourth objective was to double the number of potential micro-donors in the room that night. So, it was from this careful calculation that came our Giving Card.

Co-designed by Shana Agid's Parsons class in printmaking, the ioby giving card took nearly 50% of our ticket sale revenue and allowed guests to give it back directly to projects of their choice. The card was created to be an on-ramp to philanthropy as well as a new donor cultivation tool. Some people have talked about this card as an example of post advertising and cause marketing.

### **Step 3. Ask for Help.**

Not everyone likes fundraising, but anyone can ask for help. You need someone to make a cocktail. Ask your friends: do you know anyone who can make a cocktail? Chances are someone does. You need some candles that won't hurt the environment. Someone will be able to help you find someone who can donate them. ioby has a lot of good people in our network and we were able to get \$29,132 of in kind donations for our event.

We had everything from the space (Brooklyn Brewery), the red carpet and step & repeat (City Eventions), the food (Dirt Candy and JoeDoe to prepare, Whole Foods to deliver the groceries), the drinks (Brooklyn Brewery, Tuthilltown Spirits, Gotham Project Riesling, Kombucha Brooklyn), decor (Upscale Lighting, GoodLight Natural Candles, City Eventions) and auction items (Al Gore, Patagonia, Bill McKibben, Green Fitness Studio, Irene Boland, Franny's, Larder, Green In BKLYN, Elizabeth Royte, Steve Keene, Kombucha Brooklyn, Math-You Namie, Holstee, Lebak Farms, Argus New Seeds and Christoph Niemann) donated to us in kind and we are incredibly grateful to these local, corporate sponsors who made our event a huge success.

### **Step 4. Know Your Base.**

We have all been to terrible events. It's crowded. You're in the back. Someone is droning into a microphone and you can't understand them through the echo. You leave and even though you really love the mission of the organization, you really had a mediocre night. Yes, we gave awards to the ioby Heroes, but no, we did not have an awards ceremony. Yes, we had a gala, but we did not have any white tablecloths.

The ioby base is largely DIY, community service-oriented, creative thinkers and do-gooders. These are not the people who appreciate fancy plated dinners or long boring talks at the mic.

Our two biggest event sponsors (City Eventions and the Fledgling Fund) gave us \$1,000 cash each. Combined with our other sponsors, Tuthilltown Spirits, NRDC and Partnerships for Parks, our cash budget for the event was \$2,500. We dug deep into our best creative scrappy selves and quickly apples became our table decorations. We banned food that required utensils to avoid renting cutlery. We gave ioby whiskey glasses as gifts so we wouldn't have to rent 1,200 wine glasses. We had an art installation and gave awards provided by State Senator Eric Adams. Burlap (\$44/bolt) became our tablecloths. And at the same time, we stuck to our organization's mission: the large majority of ingredients and products are locally made, we provided vegan/vegetarian food, our event was subway-accessible, we composted our scraps.

### **Step 5. Build a Great Team.**

There's nothing I'm more grateful for than the volunteers, planning committee and host committee that made our event happen. There's no way that our staff of two people could have pulled off an event like this. We had volunteers pitching in the morning of to squeeze 200 lemons, there were volunteer photographers, serious grunt workers who hauled ice in the middle of the gala when we ran out, volunteers installed the art exhibit, checked coats and sold raffle tickets. This is also the one area that I think we could have done more. We could have had a better, more explicit system set up to support our volunteers. We were lucky that our volunteers were by nature problem-solvers and self-starters and they were able to run much of the event without direction. But we should have had better systems for them to take breaks and to eat dinner and to see their friends.

## Step 6. Use Eventbrite.

Eventbrite takes \$0.99 + 5.5% per ticket but they deserve it. We never had a single hiccup. It integrates really smoothly with Mail Chimp and embeds everywhere. Their Facebook integration works so well, it's like they're stalking your friends in dark alleys late at night, demanding that they buy tickets to your event. The CMS is simple and the WYSIWYG was slightly easier than what we've used with WordPress and Mail Chimp. The large majority of our base is online, so an online invitation made sense for us. Paper invitations are wasteful and costly. We saved gobs of time, money and trees this way.

## Step 7. Plan. Follow the Plan.

I'm not a planner by nature. I generally rely on winging it. But when you're bringing together the 300 most important people to the first event of an organization you founded, the pressure is on to make sure nothing goes wrong. So, when you make an email marketing calendar to sell tickets, follow it. Meet your own deadlines and make sure other people meet theirs. In the end, we felt like we met all our objectives. We raised \$11,000 in ticket sales and auction/raffle funds. These funds were crucial to our 2010 organizational budget, but because of our dual fundraising objective, we set aside \$6,000 of our income to be delivered back to projects through our Giving Card. Stay tuned for our report on how the Giving Card worked, coming up soon in Under the Hood.

### \*A note on human resources.

Staff time is often the forgotten budget line item in event planning. In total, ioby staff spent 432 hours planning, implementing and doing follow up for our gala, which roughly estimates at \$35/hr to \$15,000. This is a significant line item that I did not include in my overall budget numbers above. We made the decision at the outset that this was an important enough event that a significant amount of human resources would be dedicated to it. Be sure to plan and set aside an appropriate amount of staff resources based on what you actually believe you will achieve with your event.