

The Risks—and Rewards—of Reinventing a Signature Event

✚ [Susan J. Ragusa](#)

There's a great Bette Davis quote that goes something like, "Old age ain't no place for sissies." It puts me in mind of the recently departed month and the image of decrepit Father Time ambling out of the year. Certainly for nonprofits that depend on a year-end fundraising blitz, December has never been for the faint of heart. Nor, for that matter, is January, when the donation tally is complete.

That high-stakes setting informs the success story I have to share. Last year, I was part of a daring December initiative. A nonprofit organization of which I'm a board member, Astor Services for Children and Families, took a popular free event and, for the first time, required a contribution to attend. That's practically the definition of risk-taking for nonprofits. Yet, the outcome was an event that generated positive buzz and raised a significant amount of money—in fact, more than other signature events in recent years. How it was accomplished may be of value to others—at any time of the year.

Art with Therapeutic—and Fundraising—Value

By way of background, Astor Services, based in the Hudson Valley and The Bronx, provides children's mental health services, child welfare services and early childhood development programs. Until 2015, Astor's December event, known as Sugar Plum, was essentially a holiday craft fair. The timing often dovetailed with a community-wide celebration honoring the region's Dutch heritage. Participants shopped for crafts and enjoyed festive music and refreshments. But it was more of a goodwill event than a substantial fundraiser.

The catalyst for change is an inventive art therapy program. Among those Astor serves are young people with behavioral and emotional problems. The "Paint What You Feel" program in abstract expressionism encourages kids to channel strong emotions through a paintbrush using the techniques of masters like Gerhard Richter. The results can be phenomenal—and saleable, providing evidence of the program's therapeutic value and capacity to unleash impressive talent.

The Power of a Program

As an organization, that was the first key decision in reinventing our holiday event—to refocus around a specific program. As a way to

revamp, putting a program literally on display delivered the necessary "wow!" And it aligns with conventional wisdom that people give to programs. No surprise—programs are definable. They're understandable. They tell donors quickly and clearly a good deal about how an organization fulfills its mission. And programs offer a window on organizational thinking, particularly in terms of innovation. Art therapy isn't new. Supporting emotional healing on the scale of a Richter-inspired painting is tossing ideas into new territory.

Spotlighting the Paint What You Feel program products elevated the holiday event to signature status and generated a level of excitement that went beyond seasonal good cheer. Comments along the lines of "you'd expect to see this work in an NYC gallery" were consistent. Some of the paintings sold for hundreds of dollars.

Getting the Board Onboard

The other major piece in the retooling process was the decision to sell tickets and charge an entrance fee. It redefined the event and endowed it with signature status. Naturally, it was also the greatest risk. It encouraged donors to expect a great deal more. And it meant a far greater fall—or flop, to get more to the point—if more than the inevitable few were disappointed by the event.

What also made a significant difference in the fundraising outcome was a far stronger show of support from Astor board members. Where in the past only a sprinkling of members attended the Sugar Plum event, the signature version rated a must-attend from nearly the entire board. There was a contribution requirement for board members, but most went beyond their own donations. With the board's interest in the event piqued, more of the members' friends and associates were approached to purchase tickets and participate in the event.

Benefits of Fresh Thinking

With year-end success so important, the tendency with fundraising is to play it safe. Stick with what's familiar. Follow the usual pattern of appeals. So when an organization takes a risk, it's worth noting. For Astor, between the program focus and funding choices, a previously fun but underwhelming event rocketed to signature status. And given that December 2016 is a long way off, there's talk at Astor of redefining what "holiday event" implies. There can be many opportunities throughout the year to showcase exciting young artists—to their benefit and the organization's as well.

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