

A Fresh Approach to a House Party Pays Off

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The Ohio Environmental Council is a statewide nonprofit advocacy organization based in Columbus. Like a lot of nonprofit organizations, the Council had become overly reliant upon foundation grants for funding. At one point in our not-too-distant past, more than 90 percent of the organization's budget came from grants, a fact that most nonprofit E.D.'s would recognize as unhealthy—even downright dangerous.

This unbalanced funding scenario proved to be fatal to my beloved factory farm reform program in 2002. At the time, the Council was the only game in town when it came to dealing with the environmental dangers of Ohio's influx of mega factory farms. We were organizing grassroots citizen groups, serving on an important state factory farm rules committee, and garnering media around the state. Our work was making a difference—until the foundation that provided the bulk of the funding for the program made “strategic changes to their funding priorities.” Translation: no more funding for work on factory farms.

As a result of depending almost entirely on one grant, the program I had worked for several years to develop was virtually wiped out. I bitterly described this situation using “F” words—I thought the foundation was “fickle” and had succumbed to “fads” in funding. Their new funding priorities just did not match the needs on the ground in Ohio and did not fit our organization's mission.

While I had certainly heard my director talk about the need to diversify our funding base, now I fully realized the significance of her words. Not long after, the organization made the move to hire a development director to raise unrestricted general revenue. Having witnessed the organization struggle to find the right person for the position and with my fresh appreciation for the need for increased funding from individual donors, I decided to leave my comfort zone in program work and threw my hat in the ring for consideration.

I got the job and now, after two years, I'm proud to report that we have doubled our income from major gifts and significantly reduced our dependency on grants.

One-on-one meetings with donors have been the primary way in which we have raised funds and grown our major gifts program. Second in importance have been house parties. Adding a new twist to an old model, we found a formula for turning a good event into a great event—one that not only raises more money, but also involves the board of directors and other supporters in critical donor cultivation efforts.

The rest of this article describes a recent house party we held and what contributed to its success.

House Party Planning

Two of our board members who reside in the same college town offered to host a house party to raise funds for the Ohio Environmental Council. During the planning phase of

the event, the board members helped to line up meetings with other prominent members of their community who were interested in conservation issues. At these meetings, “the ask” was to serve on the House Party Host Committee. Host Committee members’ responsibilities included attending the house party, making a donation to the organization, and supplying names of friends and colleagues to invite to the party. A total of eight individuals or couples served on the host committee, including the two board members and their spouses.

The major innovation for this house party was that, instead of an entry or “ticket” price, as we had done before, we asked guests to “bring their questions and their checkbooks,” letting them know that contributions would be collected at the event. We hoped that after attendees heard about the great work we were doing and the urgent need we faced they would be inclined to give more than the \$35 or \$50 we might have otherwise received using the old “ticket” method. Plus, we knew a number of people were being invited to the party who had the capacity to give much larger gifts.

The reply card sent with the invitation also included an opportunity for people to give if they could not attend. We received a number of contributions this way, too.

Logistics and Details

Invitation: The host committee came up with the names of more than 200 friends and colleagues, which they gave to the staff, who designed, printed and sent the invitations on behalf of the hosts. The invitation included a response card and envelope and asked for an RSVP by a certain date. We asked the board members to make follow-up calls to folks who didn’t respond by that date.

Food and Drink: A few members of the host committee coordinated food and beverages. The hosts had the option of hiring a caterer or making the food themselves. They decided to make the food themselves and provided a hearty selection of hors d’oeuvres, cheese and crackers, other finger foods, and wine. We asked them to keep track of their food costs and we recorded these as in-kind contributions.

Messaging: Rather than make a generic pitch for support at the house party, we decided to ask the attendees to support a specific—and particularly urgent—campaign to protect Ohio’s wetlands. At the time, the state legislature was working on a contentious state budget. In the middle of the night (literally), a state representative had slipped a stealth, developer-backed amendment into the budget bill that would gut protection for Ohio’s wetlands and streams. The amendment was not only bad policy, it was enacted through a bad process. We dubbed this attempted rollback of Ohio’s water quality laws the “Bulldozer Amendment.” As part of our strategy to stop the amendment we wanted to raise money to run radio ads in key legislative districts. We decided that this would be the basis of our fundraising at the house party.

The Night of the House Party

Approximately 25 people attended the party—just the right number to fill the space of the home that had been offered. Here is how the evening went.

People started arriving around 6:30 and spent time mingling and eating and drinking. At about 7:15, we began the program. A board member welcomed everyone, thanked the hosts, and said a few words about the importance of our work, then introduced a second board member, who spent about five minutes talking about the work, and success, of the Council in more detail. The Council's public affairs director then gave the main presentation on the urgent issue of the Bulldozer Amendment and the radio ad campaign for which we were raising funds. To give an example of how the funds would be used, she played a radio ad from a previous wetlands-themed campaign. This was a very effective moment. The second board member then wrapped up the presentation segment with an impassioned plea for funds (see the sidebar for the key points we had brainstormed for the pitch).

SIDEBAR

Key Points for the House Party Pitch

We have an ambitious goal in front of us, we need their help; ask that they give generously to this effort. State the goal: Tonight our goal is to raise enough money to combat the Bulldozer Amendment and air radio ads in targeted districts around the state—around \$10,000. We hope to raise a fair amount towards that goal tonight. In order to do that, we hope you'll consider stretch beyond what you thought you might contribute.

If you are able to make a gift of \$500—then please do so now.

If you think you can give \$250, that would be extraordinary.

If a \$100 gift is what you had in mind, that's great.

Anything you can give would get us one step closer to stopping the Bulldozer Amendment.

We know the Ohio Environmental Council has the expertise, organizational ability and experience to defeat the Bulldozer Amendment.

That is why we decided to dig deep and give—what for our families is a fairly significant gift—and we challenge you to do the same.

Our challenge to you: As board members, we are willing to match your gift dollar-for-dollar up to a total of \$1,000 *each* to go towards this extraordinary organization and their efforts to protect Ohio's wetlands and streams. Thus, you have an opportunity to triple your gift! So, please be as generous as possible.

Now, I'm going to give you a couple of minutes to contemplate your gift. I want you to know that you have some giving options to consider:

- 1) You can write a check tonight
- 2) You can give via credit card
- 3) You can make a pledge
- 4) You can make a gift of appreciated stock

I'm going to distribute pledge forms along with pens and envelopes. Please deposit your gift in the baskets.

END SIDEBAR

After the pitch we handed out the pledge forms and envelopes and passed a basket around to collect them. The host committee said another quick round of thank yous.

We tallied up the contributions and pledges and announced that we had raised \$4,895—a huge amount for a house party, made possible by the generous doubling of gifts by the hosts. Adding in the contributions from those not able to attend who sent gifts prior to the event, the total at that point came to \$5,300! One of the donors (who gave \$500) suggested that we have a similar party in a neighboring county—of course, we’re planning on taking her up on that great suggestion!

Follow Up

The Council sent thank you letters to all the donors, signed by the staff that attended. The board members also sent separate, hand-written thank you notes on Ohio Environmental Council cards.

When the radio ads aired, we sent a follow-up letter and e-mail to everyone who had attended the house party with information on where the ads had aired and included a web link to where they could listen to the ad. It was an opportunity to thank them again, show them how their gift had been spent, and emphasize that their contribution was an important investment in protecting Ohio’s wetlands.

To top it all off—we won! The “Bulldozer Amendment!” ran out of gas and was defeated. The radio ads were instrumental to this success. I called several of our top donors to let them know the good news—and to thank them for helping achieve this important victory. This was another easy way to interact with the donors and cultivate long-term relationships. Who doesn’t love to hear good news?

Lessons Learned

Overall, the house party was an extremely successful event. Next time we will give people the option of e-mailing RSVPs and we’ll give a phone number where someone is most apt to be able to answer questions after business hours.

This house party was a lot less work and a lot more profitable than others we had done. Asking guests to contribute at the event (rather than asking for a suggested donation prior to the event) we believe yielded much larger contributions. Having the pitch come from a volunteer board member rather than a paid staff member was powerful and persuasive. Plus, having the board member offer to match the gifts was icing on the cake!

***Susan Studer King** was the Development Director of the Ohio Environmental Council. In addition to soliciting major gifts, she provided fundraising training to many of the Council’s grassroots member organizations. Susan recently left OEC to join the Peace Corps in Ecuador.*