

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM A DECADE-PLUS OF COORDINATING STUDENT-PRESENTED FUNDRAISING EVENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Please note: The following is not written in the typical format of an academic research study.*

*Since I began teaching in 1997, all of my classes have included a significant amount of experiential learning assignments. My ABSEL Conference objective is to provide a reflection on coordinating an experiential learning exercise (a student-managed fundraising event) over the past 13 years that has benefited my students, their charity partners, and the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.*

## INTRODUCTION

Information is not knowledge. The only source of knowledge is experience. —Albert Einstein

In the spring of 2011, I had an epiphany. In my event planning class, the standard exam, fictitious case study, class discussion on subject matter that appeared to be irrelevant to many students needed a major upgrade. Students were tired of imagining a situation that attacked a single sense. They needed to feel something. The lightbulb then went on, not unlike Mad Men's Donald Draper in the season finale when he thought of Coca-Cola's "I'd like to teach the world to sing..." campaign (Weiner, 2015) why not have students define, manage, market/promote, and present a fundraising event on behalf of a charity?

Since 2011, my classes have generated a significant amount of cash, merchandise, and in-kind donations on behalf of local, national, and international charities. Students have also been the subject of 19 "big check" pictures in local media, a wonderful and conversation-provoking addition to their professional portfolios.

I've applied the experiential learning model to additional classes, including my favorite, branding communications. Modeled after the early 2010's AMC Network reality television show, The Pitch (Lott et al., 2012-2013), students are placed into three to four-member "advertising agencies" where approximately every two weeks, they provide solutions for area businesses and nonprofits' branding needs. However, for this submission, I'll focus on the experiential learning component of my event planning class.

## METHODS/TIMELINE-EVENT PLANNING

Assignments in my sales promotions and event planning class is divided into two sections—four sales promotions assignments (trade show marketing/budgeting, experiential marketing, promotional packaging, and advergaming, 60% of the final grade) and event planning (40%. 20% of the assignment's grade is for the entire class, 80% is based on a self-evaluation analysis).

### The process:

- Event planning and marketing basics are presented the first three weeks of the term. The basics covered include:
  - History of student-presented events
  - Sponsorships: Terminology, analysis and sales (cash and in-kind)
  - Product strategy: What makes a great event?
  - Target market analysis
  - Issues analysis: What has and can go wrong?
  - Setting goals and objectives
  - Charity/501C3 basics
- Student strategic decision time:
  - Define the event, features/benefits; select the date, site, and time

- Select a charity partner. Students can nominate a specific charity and I also suggest a few prior partners.
  - Upon class selection, we invite charity personnel to speak to the class. Of note: These sessions have been very powerful for they put a name, face, and of most importance, mission behind the project.
- Define specific goals and objectives which have included:
  - Cash donations
  - Sponsorships: Cash and in-kind contributions
  - Attendance
  - Total contribution to the charity (cash plus merchandise donations if applicable)
  - Earned media
- Students then select the committee(s) in which they wish to focus their efforts. Committees include:
  - Branding/marketing materials development
  - Social media marketing
  - Logistics (By far the most important committee! This is where I strongly suggest the most “organized” students take part.)
  - Event feature committees: Students in three of my last fall terms (2020...not the case. Thanks, COVID!) have presented a holiday themed “gift and thrift” event. Committees have included:
    - Thrift store: Responsible for collecting, tabulating, merchandising, and distributing remaining items to a local charity’s thrift store. Note: All students are encouraged to procure clothing donations. For many, their family members (especially moms who want to clean out a few closets!) are very eager to contribute.
    - Crafts: This group research unique holiday craft ideas, a feature that keeps attendees at the event for an extended period of time.
    - Silent auction: This group bundles donations, manages the process during the event, and collects funds generated from our silent auction. Note: All students are encouraged to procure silent auction items. Many collect donations from their place of employment, parents, friends, and/or relatives.
    - Publicity/PR: Create, distribute, and monitor pre- and post-event news releases. This group also works with university communications to alert the campus community about the event. Of note: Professors have traditionally been strong “cash donations” and “merchandise purchasing” contributors.
    - Post-event activities: Student-athlete, working for a tough-nosed boss...history will demonstrate that a student or two will have to miss the event. These students are responsible for ensuring all silent auction items are picked up, sponsor thank-yous are created and distributed and other activities—for example, dropping off remaining clothing items to a charity.
- All students are responsible for:
  - Event marketing...it’s time to use one’s social media for a good purpose.
  - Tallying the hours spent working on event activities outside of class. This gives them experience in what it is like to be an independent contractor/consultant.
  - Procuring donations and sponsorships (cash, in-kind)
- Evaluation (400 points):
  - 20%, all students receive the same grade which is based on my overall view of the event.
  - 80% is based on their self-reflection/evaluation statement.
    - Hours worked on the project. Objective, as stated in the syllabus: 30 hours which equates to approximately 2.5 hours/week (not an issue the week of the event).
    - Committee(s) membership and outcomes
    - Marketing/promotions contributions
    - Day of event contributions and activities
    - Post-event duties

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Since the spring of 2011, sales promotions and event planning and nonprofit marketing communications classes have generated:

- Over \$60,000 in cash and merchandise contributions
- Thousands of dollars in earned media

### *Benefits-Charity partner:*

- Merchandise and cash contributions. For instance, our 2021 charity partner received \$4,715.00 in clothing donations (values are determined by IRS donation guidelines) and \$1,650.00 in cash. Our 2023 event produced \$2,500.00 in cash and \$4,100.00 in clothing donations.
- New life: Many charity partners have commented on how working with students has invigorated their organization's spirit.
- Increased awareness, especially to a new, younger market
- Earned media

### *Benefits-University:*

- The opportunity to demonstrate how the institution actually lives its "dedication to the community."
- Of note: The vast majority of charities have sent a well-crafted letter of thanks to my university's upper-level administration.

### *Benefits-Students:*

- The opportunity to demonstrate orally and visually what they "did" as well as learned in their college career.
  - The big check picture...these attention-grabbing and fun images always generate an "off the interview script" discussion. I've had a number of students being offered a job on the spot.
- The creation of a more charitable and giving individual who finds joy in assisting those who are in need. It is my hope that such a mindset continues in each student's life for they will be the next generation of philanthropists, grant writers, and their children's elementary school carnival chairs.
- A strong sense of self-satisfaction. Alums still mention this assignment as being an important part of their education.
- Personal skills: Teamwork, time management, record-keeping, increased oral, increased visual, and written persuasiveness as well as making the world a better place.

## MEASURING SUCCESS, NEXT STEPS, CONCLUSIONS

Overall class success is measured by comparing cash proceeds, donations, and sponsorship sales as well as earned media to prior events. A face-to-face debriefing is also held with the nonprofit client. Individual student success is measured via total hours spent, donation/sponsorship values, committee contributions, and volunteer hours procured. In the spirit of professional hockey, students also select the project's "three stars."

Though the past 13 years have provided many success stories, I ask after every student-presented event, "What could this have been?" Here are a few ideas I'm working on.

- Leverage the brand equity generated from prior events to create excitement and increase attendance
  - 2023 marked the third year of a student-presented thrift sale. In 2022, there were 25-30 people at the door when the event opened. This year, 165+ entered during the event's first few minutes.
- Utilize resources and contacts to maximize pre- and post-event earned media
- Work with students to create a plan that furthers event sponsorship contributions, including the development of a sales pitch and more succinct collateral materials
- Define new and expand upon current income sources
- Identify strategies to further engage new attendee audiences including River Falls, WI residents and regional thrifting/garage sales enthusiasts

Conclusion: If you are seeking an experiential learning exercise that opens students' minds to the joy of bettering the world, assisting the cause of a nonprofit in need, and draws attention to the contributions being made by your university, you may wish to consider implementing a student-managed thrift sale.