

So You Want To Hold a *Public Event*

by John Hilboldt

Your boss wants to put on a special event? Great idea! (Hey, it's the boss's idea...)

But before you book the grand ballroom or reserve the local VFW Hall, you'll need to ask and answer some questions objectively. Events require a significant investment of time and talent as well as energy and perseverance. Set aside the rose-colored glasses to evaluate your expectations and develop a sound strategy.

At The Heritage Foundation, we host some 175 general public programs annually—not to mention the dozens of briefings, discussions, and luncheons hosted by colleagues at Heritage, around the city, and across the country each year.

Successful events can open doors, encourage donors, forge alliances, and advance agendas. But before you book, ask yourself:

What's the purpose? Is it necessary to hold a public event? What do I hope to achieve?

Everything depends upon what you are trying to accomplish.

Nobody wants to sponsor a press conference that draws no reporters or a lecture before a sparsely filled auditorium. Make sure

the idea or topic genuinely merits a public airing or formal presentation. For current news items, can anything else be said that hasn't already been said? An event requires time to structure and build an audience. Do you have enough time to get everything together? You can simply say, "us, too" by issuing a press release or position paper.

Who are my partners?

Is your organization the best one to host on this topic? Should you consider a programming partnership?

Teaming up with like-minded groups is a win-win for both

organizations. By selecting a respected co-sponsor or well-regarded local association, you'll open doors to new contacts. Plus, both parties will have a chance to enhance their reputations.

At Heritage, we celebrate fellow foundations' significant anniversaries or the introduction of their new publications. Likewise, we recognize the contributions of fellow think tanks in issue debates through targeted co-hosted programming.

Our annual Resource Bank Meeting now regularly features national and international



*You're
invited...*

partnership activities. Attendees profit from an ever-expanding base of contacts, greater exposure for their work, and much more productivity for the investment of time, travel, and budget. It all began when we reached out to a known ally and found a potential shared benefit.

Who is my audience? Who do you want to reach? Which people are you trying to motivate?

Attendance depends upon how well you define and identify your key audience.

indeed “ready for prime time.” Here partnerships add particular value. Identify co-sponsors who can strengthen your weaknesses. Divide planning assignments to save everyone time and ease anxiety. Utilize one another’s best talents and noted speakers. Share each other’s best practices. Learn from one another’s past disasters. Multiply not only the number of people you reach, but also the purpose behind the event in the first place.

How will I promote this? What if nobody comes?

Events require a significant investment of time and talent as well as energy and perseverance. Evaluate your expectations and develop a sound strategy.

If your target audience is the media, a debate or other format that produces a few “sparks” may be the draw, not just a stand-alone lecturer. If your target audience is Hill staff or policy types, a well-respected expert to provide straightforward and clear data with an appropriate commentator or two is much more effective than a theoretical, academic guru’s monologue. If your target audience is current and hoped-to-be future supporters, a “big name” may be the ticket.

What’s the program? What format best suits your purpose? What location benefits your audience?

Everyone values his time, so an appropriate and convenient location is a must. Even though Heritage is just minutes from the Capitol, sometimes the best location for a program is on the Hill itself—particularly when we’re targeting rushed-to-death staff members. Sometimes it’s best to use outside venues as a convenience to co-sponsors or to provide a more neutral setting for more contentious policy discussions. And, sometimes your audience may just benefit from a change of routine.

Also, make sure proposed speakers are

The courtesy of a timely notice works wonders. Earlier may not always be better, but last-minute notices are virtually pointless. An appropriately timed invitation shows respect for your invitees. Electronic invitations are an efficient, effective, and prompt method for reaching large numbers. However, just because the process may be deemed “instant,” audiences don’t appear at the blink of an eye.

Programming partners again provide added impact, increasing the likely connections with media, advancing your invitation network, and generating additional buzz for your activity.

Public events do require groundwork and a lot of labor. They can be subject to missteps but they can be the best method for marketing your message, building your image, and promoting your agenda.

So, you want to have an event. Then get busy!

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