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**COVID-19 Virtual Fundraiser Brief**

**May 29, 2020**

**What is a virtual fundraiser?**

A virtual fundraiser is an online fundraising event. Instead of gathering together physically, supporters gather online, using technology like live-streaming, video, and peer-to-peer fundraising software.

Creating a virtual fundraiser does take some outside-the-box thinking but does not require that you reinvent the wheel. The following brief offers some helpful tips and will give you concrete examples of how other organizations, including chapters of The Arc, have successfully hosted virtual fundraiser events/campaigns.

**What is an example of a virtual fundraiser?**

**The Virtual Walkathon**

A well-known and successful example of this type of fundraiser is the Breast Cancer Walk, which generates millions of dollars a year to support breast cancer research and advocacy for survivors. Typically, these events take place on a designated course (a high-school track, local park, or designated road that would be closed off for the event) and generate revenue by having participants pay/donate to register for the event.

Rather than cancel their events around the country, many groups who typically host walkathons have created virtual walkathons. In this scenario, runners and walkers would use the same registration and donation forms as they’ve done for past events but then actually run/walk within the safety and comfort of their own neighborhoods as opposed to on a designated track.

While it seems that this format may lack in human connection, there are a number of apps such as [Map My Run](https://www.mapmyrun.com/us/) or [Strava](https://www.strava.com/) through which participants can share their run routes, times, and other fun tidbits before, during and after the event. These runners/walkers can then further contribute to the campaign by posting their run/walk on social media and either using a specific hashtag or tagging the organization in their posts.

Check out [Running Down Dementia’s Virtual Run event page](https://run.thetreblechallenge.org/).

**Rules of Thumb Prior to Setting Up Your Fundraiser**

Before putting your virtual fundraiser together, here are a few rules of thumb to follow:

1. Remember that a virtual event can be - and hopefully will be - just as well attended and dynamic as an in-person event.  It is, therefore, critically important that an event planner or planning committee should take the same time and consideration in planning and executing the event.
2. You do not need to be super tech-savvy or up-to-date on the latest apps and devices. In fact, using well-known and simpler technology tools and platforms may even make the event easier to manage and easier to participate in for your audiences.
3. You should plan the same way you typically plan in-person events. You start by establishing your fundraising and secondary goals, creating a budget, and creating a master event plan. Then, you’ll set up the logistics, promote your event, and host it.
4. The event can either be a single-day event (like a gala) or a multi-day event like a walkathon (see  [The Arc of Somerset County 5K Walk and Dog Jog](https://www.thearcofsomerset.org/events/special_events.html))

**Playbook for Planning a Virtual Fundraiser**

NOTE: This document is meant to present a loose plan on how your organization can go about planning a virtual fundraiser and is not meant to be an exhaustive plan. For a more detailed event planning checklist, refer to either [Fundly’s 17 Step Checklist](https://blog.fundly.com/fundraising-event-checklist/) or [Wild Apricot’s Virtual Event Checklist](https://trial.wildapricot.com/virtual-event-checklist?_ga=2.97038426.433267948.1589991147-1589991145485).

1. **Establish a Concept for Your Fundraiser.**

The first step in planning your virtual fundraiser - or any fundraiser - is to determine what kind of event you want to have. This could be simply a virtual version of an event you’ve held in the past or an event you had planned on having in-person. If this is your first virtual fundraiser, you may also want to take the opportunity to try a new format.

There are many possibilities for your virtual fundraising event, including:

* A traditional speech and program
* A [virtual scavenger hunt](https://www.goosechase.com/blog/planning-a-scavenger-hunt-for-adults/)
* A video conference trivia game or challenge
* A virtual charity auction
* A virtual run or walk, where participants track their solo miles and minutes while raising funds like a traditional walk-a-thon (they can even stream their walk to inspire others)
* A virtual dance party, where participants listen to the same streamed playlist and dance at their own houses.

Another consideration is what the purpose of the event is and who your audience is. Is it an awareness and fundraising event that is open to the public? If so, it would be important to have an educational or informational piece that speaks on your organization’s work and mission, such as a speech or presentation from a board member or staff. If this is an event for families, friends, and the individuals you serve, the event’s programming should include more fun elements - such as the trivia game or dance party ideas that we’ve listed above.

For more fundraiser event ideas and how to get started in the planning process, check out [GoFundMe’s virtual fundraising event resource page](https://charity.gofundme.com/c/blog/virtual-fundraiser).

1. **Set a Fundraising Goal**

**Goal or goals?** Setting your event goal(s) is almost as important - if not more so - than starting the planning process with a solid concept of what kind of event you want to hold. You may have one specific financial goal in mind, such as a specific dollar amount you want to raise, but you can also add some secondary or tertiary goals as well. Fundraisers are also a great way to raise awareness of your work or brand in the community, so an example of a secondary goal could be getting more individuals or families involved in your organization, either as donors, volunteers, or board members.

**Match your stated goals to the format of your event.** In many ways, your event goal(s) will dictate what kind of event you should host. If your main objective is to crowdfund and get many smaller donations through families and individuals in your organization’s network, something like a walkathon might be fitting for your goal. If you plan on hosting a smaller fundraiser with several high profile philanthropists or representatives from local foundations to get fewer but larger donations or grants, your virtual fundraiser should include several programmatic elements like presentations from staff and board members to educate these donors on what your organization does and what types of activities they could look to fund.

**Set your budget based off of your fundraising goal.** Once you have an idea of what your event will entail programmatically and what your fundraising goal is, the next step is to create a budget that is reasonable and that will maximize your return. Fortunately, virtual events have significantly lower overhead than in-person events, so you’ll get to keep more of the money you raise. You can use [this list of event budget line items](https://www.dropbox.com/s/014zbon14bvv5fw/Event%20Expenses%20Sample.pdf?dl=0) to see just how many you can cross off the list as you create your virtual event budget.

At the same time, you may also want to reconsider the amount that you’re asking for from your event guests as the value and nature of the product you are providing to them will not be the same as an in-person event. For instance, if you’re planning on hosting a ticketed virtual gala, you may consider lowering your ticket prices as there will be no food or theatrical production that would warrant the full ticket price. This may, in turn, impact your revenue, so be mindful of that as you craft your budget.

**Communicate how you will be working toward the goal.** Whether you’re charging for tickets to your virtual event or collecting revenue from a live auction, you want to make sure to include how people can donate in your communications leading up to the event. We will cover how to promote the event below, but it is important to inform people on how they will contribute so that you can guarantee/predict revenue before your event takes place.

1. **Plan and Execute the Event**

Now that you have a general concept of what you want your event to look like, a fundraising goal and budget, it is now time to put the pieces together and execute your plan.

**Software Options for Virtual Events**

Let’s begin by considering what your virtual platform will be. This decision is based entirely on what kind of event you’re going to have. If it is a presentation-based event, such as a gala or donor breakfast, using a common tool like [Zoom](https://zoom.us/) could be sufficient. There are also other platforms that are specifically designed to host other types of events, many of which are listed below courtesy of [Wild Apricot.](https://www.wildapricot.com/blogs/newsblog/2020/04/14/virtual-fundraiser#what-is-a-virtual-fundraiser)

* For live-streaming: [Zoom](https://zoom.us/), [Facebook Live](https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/solutions/facebook-live), and [YouTube Live](https://www.youtube.com/live)
* For auctions and mobile bidding: [Bidding for Good,](https://www.biddingforgood.com/auction/biddingforgood.action) [OneCause](https://www.onecause.com/solutions/mobile-bidding-auction-software), and [Silent Auction Pro](https://www.silentauctionpro.com/) ([Here is a more comprehensive list of Silent Auction platforms.](https://www.wildapricot.com/articles/silent-auctions-simplified))
* For races and walks: [RunSignup](https://runsignup.com/Services/Donations), [Racery,](https://racery.com/) and [Charity Footprints](https://www.charityfootprints.com/nonprofit-virtual-race-fundraisers) [(Here’s a complete guide on how to put a virtual walkathon together.)](https://www.causevox.com/blog/how-to-organize-a-virtual-walkathon-or-race/)
* For peer-to-peer and online fundraising: [CauseVox](http://www.causevox.com/), [Classy](https://www.classy.org/), [Qgiv,](https://www.qgiv.com/peer-to-peer-fundraising) and [Snowball](https://snowballfundraising.com/recurring-donations/)

As you’ll see, many of these platforms are either already free or are offering significant discounts to nonprofits during the coronavirus, so your organization won’t have to dip too far into its budget to run this event online. Additionally, here are some useful resources for your event preparation:

* [How to Live Stream Successfully: A Preparation Checklist for Marketers](https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/how-to-live-stream-checklist) — HubSpot
* [Best Practices for Hosting a Digital Event](https://blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2020/03/04/best-practices-for-hosting-a-digital-event/?_ga=2.7410482.1251944200.1584968424-1145367901.1579107626) — Zoom
* [Making the most of Facebook Live](https://socialgood.fb.com/learning-support/live/) — Facebook

**Timing and logistics Before the Event**

Equally important to your choice of virtual collaboration platform is how you choose to structure the event schedule on the day of the event and the timeline of activities leading up to the event.

**Testing -** By now, all of us should be experts on how to use Zoom, Skype, FaceTime and other video conferencing software - yet we all know that technical glitches and connectivity issues are all too common. Make sure to test your connection and platform several times prior to your event so that you do not encounter any issues with it on the day.

**Accessibility -** We put this at the top of the list of priorities because, without making sure your event is accessible, it will be difficult for the individuals you serve and some of their family members with disabilities to follow along. [Check out this helpful resource](https://rootedinrights.org/how-to-make-your-virtual-meetings-and-events-accessible-to-the-disability-community/) on the things you can do before and during the event to make the event accessible to all.

**Event and Registration pages on your website -** As is best practice in planning in-person events, it is essential to have an event and registration page that clearly explains your vision, how the event will work, donation instructions and how to register. Here are [5 Free/Open Source Event Registration Software](https://blog.capterra.com/8-free-and-open-source-event-registration-software/) for you to use to set your webpage up, courtesy of Capterra.

**Event Schedule** - For the schedule on the day of the event, consider the format of the event and type of event it is in order to determine the event’s duration and flow.

For instance: if you are hosting a gala-style event, you may want to make it shorter so that your guests’ attention span does not suffer and that they don’t abandon your event due to “[Zoom Fatigue](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting)”. On the other hand, you may want to allow a longer time frame for a walkathon, as everyone will be participating and travelling at different speeds.

**NOTE:** It’s also important to remember that people will most likely be tuning in from home, which means that their attention span might be shorter than normal and they may have competing stimuli/priorities, such as pets or children running around during their call. Make sure that the most important programmatic elements come earlier in the program and that you are short and to the point in expressing the program’s purpose.

**Keeping participants engaged -** Regardless of event length, it is important to find ways to keep participants engaged and interested in the event’s proceedings. Consider posting on social media during the event and breaking spoken presentations up with short videos. If these options are available, use chat functions and polls during the event to elicit responses from people. Also offer individuals the opportunity to speak to you directly if they are having issues with following along in the event.

1. **Promote your event**

There are a multitude of ways and avenues that your chapter can use to promote your virtual event. Many chapters already have newsletters as well as social media accounts, which will be important tools to use in this effort. Additionally, you will want to really start promoting your event a month in advance to give your audience plenty of time to respond. Here are some [guidelines for how to promote your event](https://bloomerang.co/blog/how-to-communicate-w-your-event-attendees-before-your-event/), courtesy of Bloomerang.

1. **Have fun with it**

Sometimes it is hard to see the silver lining on having to move an in-person meeting to a virtual meeting, yet it is important to have fun with this event. Your event guests understand this slightly different format but will respond to your positivity. Have fun and relax… it’ll be a wonderful event!

**Examples of Virtual Fundraisers from across The Arc’s network**

* [The Arc of Chester County (PA) Bubble Walk, Run & Fun (May 17)](https://www.montgomerynews.com/news/regional/arc-of-chester-countys-fundraiser-goes-virtual/article_9315c9f3-9c18-5d0e-9752-c88312fce8cd.html)
* [The Arc of Somerset County’s 5K Walk and Dog Jog (June 1 - June 20)](https://www.thearcofsomerset.org/events/special_events.html)
* [The Arc of Midland (MI) 15th Annual Helpers & Heroes Virtual Arc Stroll, Roll & 5k Run/Walk (May 1- May 17)](https://www.thearcofmidland.org/2020/15th-annual-arc-stroll-roll-5k-virtual-run-walk-5-1-20-5-17-20/)

*This document is not intended to provide professional advice. The ideas in this document are offered for consideration by chapters of The Arc. This brief is brought to you by National Conference of Executives of The Arc and The Arc US.*