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DIVINE DECOR



The right light: The Catalina Island Conservancy makes the most of its traditional location, adding only details such as gobos that change each year (here, below). Photos by Shana Cassidy.

The Balancing Act

These fundraising pros share how to walk that fine line between ‘wow’ and ‘whoa!’ By Susan Cuadrado

When it comes to designing galas for nonprofits—which is essentially walking that fine line between “wow, that looks amazing” and “whoa, you spent too much”—Jen Poyer, CSEP, senior special events manager for Long Beach, Calif.-based Catalina Island Conservancy, sums it up best:

“Nonprofit events have a lot of variables when it comes to what is on trend and what is acceptable. We work in a world of savvy consumers who have been exposed to a variety of experiences, and expect each experience to surpass the last,” she notes. “What they do not often connect with is the cost or logistical requirements required to support some of those high-level experiences—and this is where things become a bit tricky.”



SAME SPACE, NEW FACE Indeed, one of the trickiest design elements pertains to location—creating a new and different event experience in the same venue year after year. “Keeping an event fresh when retuning to the same venue challenges you to think creatively, not only to use the space in a different or unexpected way, but also to present the organization and content in a new way,”

says Michelle Rathbun, president of Washington-based Chromis Event Strategies. “I have presented the same nonprofit events in the same venue using vastly different colors and imagery to create a completely different feel.” For a military client, Rathbun skipped a staid navy blue and white color palette with traditional decor, using instead a more modern approach that amped up authenticity with an exhibit of rare, never-before-seen military artifacts. “This allowed guests to see and experience the nonprofit’s mission and event in a very different way,” she explains.

Alison Silcoff, president of Alison Silcoff Events in Montreal, Quebec, produces the Daffodil Ball, currently in its 24th year



The power of focal points: Chromis Event Strategies uses restraint in displaying artifacts at events that raise funds for military veterans (at left) and creates a focal point to distract from unattractive features (here). Photos by Joyce Boghosian and Haik Naltchayan/Naltchayan Media.

raising funds for the Canadian Cancer Society. “The first few years, the decor was strictly floral effects using thousands of daffodils,” she said. However, since 2003, the gala has featured a different theme each year, with the iconic yellow flowers a common, unifying thread. “Daffodils appear in every theme, but otherwise the look and experience is completely different,” Silcoff says.

Repositioning the room is another way to re-create the space without breaking the budget. “We encourage our clients to change the orientation of the room to keep things fresh,” says Shelly Tolo, president of Seattle-based Tolo Events. One trick, she says, is to add seating risers to the floor plan to elevate guests on the sides or in the back of the room. The result is twofold: It changes the look of the room and also makes the guests seated around the perimeter feel just as important as those seated in the middle.

THE ‘WOW’ FACTOR

Decor for a nonprofit fundraiser has everything to do with strategy—putting the proper piece or prop in the perfect place. There’s no room for the superfluous. “You often don’t have a large budget to spend on room transformations, so you need to be strategic and think about where you want to draw the guests’ attention—and focus your money and creativity on that spot,” Rathbun says. To that end, she



Saying it with flowers: Alison Silcoff Events brands the Daffodil Ball with ballerinas holding daffodils poised to greet guests. Photo courtesy Alison Silcoff.

suggests using a visual anchor—a dramatic piece that draws the eye and keeps focus where you want it. For a recent event, she staged a custom Harley-Davidson motorcycle on a riser, spotlighted from above. “It drew guests into the room and captured and held their attention; they never looked up to see the empty 150-foot-high ceiling stretching above them.”

Silcoff agrees—in threes. “We try to have at least three decor ‘wows’ at each event—one at the entrance, one at the cocktail area, and at least one in the dining room,” she explains. “If you splurge on just three eye-catching creations, you can often get away with scrimping elsewhere.”

As an example, she cites the 2015 “Shanghai Silk” themed Daffodil Ball, which featured an “Oriental Pearl” stilt-walking character towering over guests, backed

by a massive wall of colorful Chinese parasols.

For Tolo and her team, it comes down to technology—specifically video and video mapping. “We have a media content designer on our team who animates everything from ballroom walk-in looks to the live auction marketing,” she says. “We live in a digital and interactive world, so static screen images just don’t keep people’s attention throughout a long event. And frankly, the video screens are the biggest canvases in the room, so it’s important to include money in the budget to use them correctly.”

FRUGAL FLORAL

“When it comes to florals for fundraisers, cost-saving strategies demonstrate thoughtfulness, creativity and fiscal responsibility,” Rathbun says. “We see a lot of creative designs, including the use of succulents and a focus on sustainable arrangements, such as herbs.”

To that end, Rathbun suggests buying seasonally and locally, which saves money and supports area producers, issues that might resonate with both clients and attendees. For example, for a spring gala for a nonprofit with an environmental component, Rathbun and her team presented tulips in birch-bark vases. “The tulip colors were based on the brand, the natural wood was fitting, and the overall effect was lovely without looking extravagant,” she says. She also

recommends the use of non-floral options that support the theme or mission of the organization. “We’ve used food baskets, as well as photographs with inspirational quotes,” she says.

DELIGHTFUL DONATIONS

Silcoff finds donations to be her best budget-buster. “Rather than cutting back, we invest our time in getting as much as possible donated or deeply discounted,” she says. “The sales pitch to suppliers and sponsors is the visibility that their products and services will get to a very high-profile clientele. For example, a miniature train we used as a Mardi Gras float cost us less than \$1,000, and the owner received two requests to book it within a month of the gala.”

Creative interpretation of theme, she adds, is another way to avoid unnecessary expense. For example, at the “Madame de Pompadour” theme Daffodil Ball in 2003, Silcoff knew that characters dressed in 18th century costumes would be prohibitively expensive. Instead, she lined the staircase with ballet students in black leotards, who clutched bouquets of daffodils trailing colorful ribbons. Similarly, for the 2011 “Russian Romance” theme, the ballet students donned long white tutus while Tchaikovsky’s “Swan Lake” played. ●

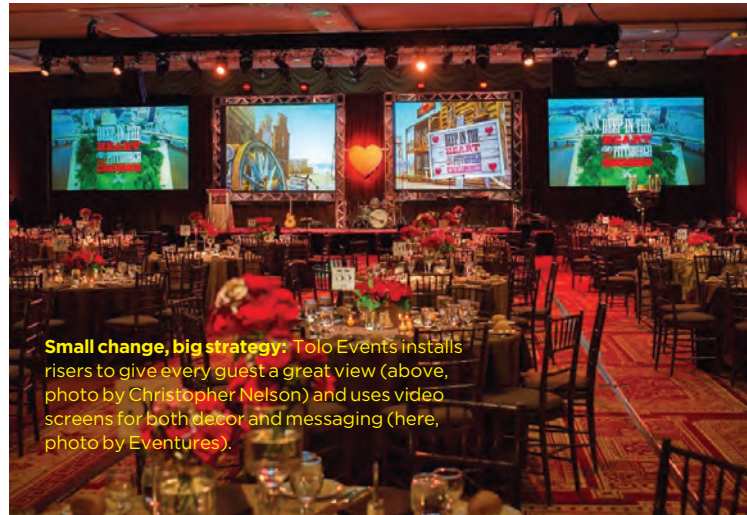
RESOURCES

ALISON SILCOFF EVENTS
www.alisonsilcoff.com

CATALINA ISLAND CONSERVANCY
www.catalinaconservancy.org

CHROMIS EVENT STRATEGIES
www.chromisevents.com

TOLO EVENTS
www.toloevents.com



Small change, big strategy: Tolo Events installs risers to give every guest a great view (above, photo by Christopher Nelson) and uses video screens for both decor and messaging (here, photo by Eventures).

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