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By Amber Kispert

# Trading in Big, Beautiful Galas for Intimate, Virtual Storytelling

Nonprofits embracing the idea of a virtual gala as a way to maintain donors

THE PACKAGING THAT A VIRTUAL FUNDRAISING GALA BOX COMES IN CAN BE JUST AS IMPORTANT AS THE ITEMS INSIDE. *Photo courtesy vibrant table catering & Events*

“Donors don’t like the idea of sitting and watching a screen,” said Jen Poyer, a Los Angeles-based event planner who works closely with nonprofits. “The question becomes, how do we create these interactive experiences that will keep somebody engaged?”

Finding the right solution to support nonprofits as they struggle to maintain their fundraising efforts may seem daunting from the outside, but it often distills down to two simple elements: storytelling and engagement.

“You need to look at galas differently because they can’t really be recreated the same way virtually,” said

**N**onprofits rely on their annual galas to raise donations that help keep them fiscally viable in the years to follow. But as large gatherings remain unattainable, how can this be accomplished? Bringing fundraising galas into the virtual realm has proven challenging being these events rely so heavily on the human element. Auctions, high plate tickets, facility tours: all part of the in-person experience.



VIBRANT TABLE CATERING & EVENTS PREPARED A FRUIT AND CHEESE BOX FOR A RECENT FUNDRAISING GALA. *Photo courtesy Vibrant Table Catering & Events*





THE PINK AID VIRTUAL FUNDRAISING GALA TOOK PLACE EARLIER THIS SUMMER. *Photo courtesy Jeffrey Selden*

Samantha Swaim of Swaim Strategies out of Portland, OR. “When you try to fake like there is a crowd, it feels inappropriate, dishonest, and there is this weird disconnect. It needs to be more intimate: less about the stuff and more about how the story is told.”

## The power of storytelling

Whether you are hosting a fundraising event in-person or virtually, the nonprofit’s mission must always be the focus, and sharing that story becomes so much more important when conveyed in a virtual world.

“You always have to think about that personal connection,” Poyer said, “especially when you’re in that fundraising capacity.”

And do not forget about potential donors that nonprofits may be connecting with for the first time.

“But that’s the good news; it opens them up to people and a reach far beyond their local fundraising. It no longer matters where you live—you can participate and enjoy the fun that surrounds these virtual experiences,” Jeffrey Selden from Marcia Selden Catering & Events said. “Virtual events will attract interest and



THE BOXES THAT MARCIA SELDEN CATERING & EVENTS PREPARED FOR THE PINK AID VIRTUAL FUNDRAISING GALA INCLUDED TRUFFLE POPCORN, A COCKTAIL KIT, THAI SHRIMP CHIPS, HAND-CUT POTATO CHIPS, CANDY LIPS, PINK AID COOKIES, CHOCOLATE COVERED PRETZELS AND FRENCH MACARONS. *Photo courtesy Jeffrey Selden*

fundraising from people all over the world whom they may never have had the opportunity to connect with.”

When thinking about the best way to tell a nonprofit’s story, Swaim suggests that you do not have to look any further than some of your favorite television shows, whether that is a “couch talk” style interview show, a news broadcast, or even a game show.

“It needs to be intimate and much more like a television experience,” she said. “Rather than thinking of the theme of your party and trying to recreate your party, replicate a TV show that you like.”

In addition to the program itself, a nonprofit’s story can also be told through giveaways, which is why partnerships with caterers become so important.

“These fundraisers are critical for the success of their foundations, so

many of these nonprofits are looking for options and ideas to help move forward and keep their messaging and fundraising efforts alive,” Selden said. “And by partnering with caterers they can come up with customized options in order to move forward without having to give up on their galas.”

## The “secret sauce”

The best way to ensure that donors “attend” a virtual fundraising gala is to make it more interactive and engaging than just a video presentation. These donors and sponsors want to see value in their attendance, and they want to know that their contributions are appreciated.

One of the most surefire ways to convey that appreciation, Poyer and Swaim agree, is to deliver specialized gift boxes to attendees and past donors. Poyer suggests





NONPROFITS HAVE TURNED TO CATERERS AND EVENT PLANNERS TO BRAINSTORM HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY BRING THEIR FUNDRAISING GALAS VIRTUAL. *Photo courtesy the AV Department*



FOR A VIRTUAL FUNDRAISING GALA, IT'S IMPORTANT TO FIND THE RIGHT WAY TO TELL THE ORGANIZATION'S STORY, WHETHER IT'S A "COUCH TALK," NEWSCAST, GAMESHOW OR VIDEO REEL. *Photo courtesy Swaim Strategies*

having tiered price points for those interested in attending the virtual gala. For example, a gift box might be provided to those who have donated prior to the start of the event, but not to someone who may only be a prospect. Of course, any prospect who donates during or after the event should be acknowledged in some way.

In summer 2020, Marcia Selden Catering & Events delivered 600 boxes for Pink Aid's fundraising gala, which was celebrating its 10-year anniversary. Pink Aid provides emergency financial assistance for breast cancer patients in need.

"Reaching out to donors with small touchpoints every four to six months keeps fundraising efforts alive,"

Selden said. "You need to be able to think 'inside the box' and create offerings beyond in-person events. Our nonprofit clients have been excited about the many different options that we offer with regard to keeping their galas relevant, safely planned, exciting, and unique, all while continuing their push for raising funds and offering an amazing guest experience."

When thinking about what items to include in the boxes, Kurt Beadell, Creative Director for Vibrant Table Catering & Events in Portland, OR, suggests incorporating limited menus that are delicious, fast, and easy to package, transfer, and prepare. "The meals are a treat and a delight to our

guests and they are delicious and easy to prepare for as well."

Swaim suggests including a kids menu option since so many families are quarantining at home. She also suggests options for those with dietary restrictions.


In addition to a meal, Swaim and Poyer also recommend that the delivered boxes should include information about the nonprofit, event instructions, and other branded items to reinforce the nonprofit's mission.

"The secret sauce is to get the event on their calendar," Swaim said.

Another way to engage donors? Offer the option of donating in real time through text or a donation app which will then be shown in a donation tracking thermometer or grid during the virtual gala, Swaim said. Another example, for an upcoming event that Poyer is working on, is to have attendees be able to request a song by making a minimum real time donation.

Virtual fundraising galas may be here to stay in some capacity or another, so reach out to the nonprofits in your area today to see how you can help.

"It's not going to be one day that we flip the switch and we go back to meeting in person," Poyer said.

"Wherever our donors are, we may not all be in the same place, but we are all still together." 





By Chef Robin Selden



**Editor's note:** One of the iconic images you will see whenever you encounter the **Marcia Selden Catering & Events** brand is a pair of red lips, poised for a smooch. Robin explained that her grandmother was Miss Cuba 1938 and a Palmolive girl, who danced in several of the Ziegfield Follies shows. "She was the image of a '40s beauty queen," Robin said. "She always had her red or hot pink lipstick on, and it really became a thing for us, initially started as my mom's [Marcia's] obsession." Today you will find this family-owned business touting signature lip candies, cookies, stickers, coasters, and even masks, all in homage to a beautiful person who could captivate an audience with a single glance.

## Thinking Inside a Box

**Who on earth** would think that we would ever, as luxury, restaurant-style caterers, be psyched about creating interesting and exciting food boxes? If you told me we'd be doing this a year ago—as we were deeply immersed in our most successful year in our 40 years of business—I would have told you that you were out of your mind! But in 2020, we literally had to stop catering as we knew it and begin to specialize in socially distanced, safely served and serviced catering.

Many of our incredible corporate and nonprofit clients embraced our parties in a box concept, and we have been doing events this way now for hundreds of people at a time, even shipping the boxes nationally (look out Harry & David!).

We see that people still need to celebrate life's moments: it is our job to help them during these challenging times. In addition to parties in a box we assembled "Polo Picnics" in a box to sell at the Greenwich Polo matches. Boxes for our boating clients were called "Marcia's Maritime" and for our jetsetters with private planes we offered "Marcia's Medallion Club." We designed really cool branding and packaging to elevate the experience for all the variations, which set us apart from anything else that they could get locally. We also created a loyalty program for each of these, encouraging repeat business and giving them an opportunity to receive discounts based on their orders. Listen, regardless of how

wealthy someone is, when you put an incentive program in front of them, they bite! It is soft sales and it makes it easy for our sales team to get the repeat business.

As caterers, we create memories and evoke joy through an experience that tastes really great! Our clients currently want home cooked meals that show up to their doorsteps (contact free in most cases). They don't care about the garnish or what micro green sits on top. They appreciate seasonal, locally sourced, and fresh ingredients that are cooked really well. Our dishes highlight the ingredients—no over seasoning or saucing...very Tuscan in feel with EVOO, lemon, garlic, sea salt, and fresh pepper. All they have to do is to warm them when they are ready to eat. They show up as pre-packaged meals and we have been told that many of our customers eat them right out of the containers...talk about less fuss!

In addition to the custom catered experiences we are known for, I'm most excited about our newest concept called "Dinner-Parties." Specifically, we will provide a turn-key "Dinner-Party" complete with unique and curated menus, custom printed menu cards, tabletop rentals that are designed based on the menu theme, florals to complement the tabletop, awesome wines, and specialty crafted cocktails. Our thought was to take the stress and the work out of entertaining and to provide our clients with everything they needed to host a perfect dinner party at home.

It comes down to the experience. If you make something memorable and delicious, people will never forget that. And, when we are on the other side of this pandemic, they will hire you again to create their in-person celebrations.