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Society writer Shelby Hodge offers advice on how to do your do

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With the holidays behind us, nonprofits across the city are looking ahead to another year of special events, testing their creativity to come up with the most enticing and enjoyable means of teasing serious money from their constituencies.

As the program planning begins, we would like to offer a few suggestions high on practicality and solid in terms of pleasing the audience.

Here are 10 tips on organizing a fundraiser with this year's audience and next year's turnout in mind.

- 1.** In planning the program, remember that less is more. Keep the number of people taking the microphone countable on one hand, and carefully limit the speaking time. Your audience, day or night, has come for a social occasion, not a lecture series.
- 2.** Don't beat the audience to death with the nonprofit's message. You already have their money. They've already signed on in your support, which most likely means that they know what the charity is all about.
- 3.** Honor your sponsors in the written program. Thanking major underwriters and table purchasers from the podium unnecessarily slows down the flow. We applaud those who ask the audience to check the program for generous donors.
- 4.** Keep live-auction items to a minimum — three are sufficient, more than five are pushing it. Professional auctioneer Jeff Smith says five "is getting to be too many." A large number of live-auction items "kills the momentum of the party, and it also affects the bidding because people get tired of listening," he says.
- 5.** Strike up the band as soon as the auction or speakers are finished in order to avoid the lull that some party goers interpret as a signal to exit. During the dinner hour, however, keep the music low. No one likes to shout over the filet mignon.
- 6.** Maintain a sensible schedule when planning weeknight fundraisers. One of the many things we admired about former Mayor Bob Lanier was his preference for being home in time for the 10 o'clock news. Now, that may be cutting things a little short, but exiting by 10 p.m. on a school night is as late as it should get.
- 7.** If you have a weeknight event with speeches and honorees, save the money, and don't hire entertainment other than a DJ. Few midweek party goers remain to dance after a dinner program.
- 8.** Locate your honorees and speakers within shouting distance of the stage. If they must be seated elsewhere, have them approach the stage before they are announced. A tight, well-observed timeline, the best organizational aid for any event, can spell this out.

**9.** When honoring more than two or three individuals, consider limiting their responses to a simple "thank you" rather than extended remarks that further lengthen your program.

**10.** Hire an ample number of valet parkers. No one wants the last and most enduring memory of an event being that of waiting in the valet line for 30 minutes or more. Have chicken instead of beef, but don't be chintzy on the number of valets.

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