

# Benefits pry out donations

Stephen Quazzo's challenge to City Year Chicago board members—that each sell an extra table—boosted its benefit, Executive Director Lisa Morrison Butler says.

## Gala fundraising season bounces back; boards make extra push, parties get some tweaks

BY LISA BERTAGNOLI

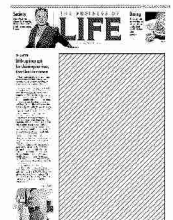
With the spring social season in high gear, parties seem well-populated and revenue is rebounding over last year—but it's not coming easy.

Organizations are working harder and more creatively for the money. Lower ticket prices, strategically chosen guests of honor and a laser-like focus on the charities' hopefully attention-grabbing work are all designed to lure donors still willing to provide support, but only after carefully picking and choosing their causes.

"People are being very conservative," says Betty Bergstrom, a Chicago-based non-profit consultant. The benefits themselves "are still lovely parties, but the budgets look like they've been cut down." Smaller ensembles, rather than full orchestras, are providing entertainment, and lavish fresh-flower centerpieces are making way for feathers and other less costly decorations.

Erikson Institute, a Chicago non-profit that focuses on early-childhood education, scaled down its annual Prism

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Ball in April to cocktail attire from black tie.

"It's more in keeping with the economic times," says Randy Holgate, vice-president for institutional advancement at Erikson. "We want very nice, but not lavish, parties."

The Prism Ball has felt the recession bite: Gross proceeds this year are expected to be \$800,000, compared with \$1.6 million in 2008. Though seemingly weak, this year's figure is 57% above last year's paltry take: "To me, that's a sign that we're back on the trajectory we'd like to be on," Ms. Holgate says.

The mood at parties is considerably more buoyant this year than last, says Gold Coast resident Gale Gottlieb, president of the Lincoln Park Zoo's Women's Board.

Ms. Gottlieb has attended a half-dozen events this spring, including a designer resale fundraiser to benefit Howard Brown Health Center, which helps people with AIDS and HIV. (Along with Muntu Dance Theatre, Howard Brown made news this season for an investigation into how it used grant money.) As for a rebound in benefits? "You can tell when you see the amount of invitations rolling across your desk, and there's more and more of them," she says.

Some of the parties aren't quite the same, though.

The Museum of Contemporary Art has tweaked its annual benefit, making its party less exclusive to bring in roughly the same money.

Last year, its Dry Ice party raised \$806,000 with 200 attendees. This year, its artEdge benefit concert, scheduled for May 15, is expected to gross \$850,000, but with 500 attendees. Ticket prices are \$500, down from \$1,500 last year, dress is casual and there's a new twist: a \$200-per-ticket after-party, designed to draw younger and less well-heeled art lovers.

Lisa Key, the museum's

fundraising director, says the changes seem to be well-received. As of late April, sponsor tables, at \$25,000 each, were sold out, and 44 guests had purchased \$1,000 tables, up from 21 last year. "That's a good indicator," Ms. Key says, but still not the same as in the freewheeling, pre-recession days.

"It's not the situation anymore where you send an invitation and they will come," Ms. Key says. "You call six months in advance; you send a letter; the chair calls one more time; then you send the invitation. It's a lot more work."

City Year Chicago event co-chair Stephen Quazzo pushed board members to amp up attendance, and revenue, by selling a table in addition to buying their own (tables ranged from \$5,000 to \$25,000). Half the board met the challenge, says Mr. Quazzo, 50, CEO at Transwestern Investment Co. in Chicago.

It was "a pleasant surprise" how much his efforts boosted the Ripples of Hope dinner in March, says Lisa Morrison Butler, executive director of City Year Chicago, which sends young people on yearlong mentoring assignments to the city's public schools. The party had 430 attendees and netted \$424,000; that's up from \$380,000 and 400 guests last year, but down considerably from the more flush 2006. That year, it drew 520 guests and \$502,000 when it honored Barack Obama, then a U.S. senator.

"We have felt the recession for sure," Ms. Butler says.

Lest they be distracted by the fun of watching polar bears frolic at the new Great Bear Wilderness Exhibit, guests at the Brookfield Zoo's annual Whirl Ball were repeatedly reminded why they were there. Even tram guides subtly, but emphatically, stressed that the event was a fundraiser.

At a March event for the Girl Scouts of Greater Chicago and Northwest Indiana, Harris Bank

Senior Vice-president Yasmin Bates-Brown called out guests on their giving, asking them to raise their hands if they were willing to donate \$300.

#### PECKING ORDER

The zoo's Whirl Ball has faced another wrinkle in recent years: Held on roughly the same date since its inception 29 years ago, it has had some competition since 2007. The American Cancer Society, which has featured high-profile guests such as Martin Short and "CBS Evening News" host Katie Couric, now holds its Discovery Ball the same evening.

In response, the Whirl Ball may move its date: "We have people who are major donors to us, and some people go to that ball instead of ours," Mr. Strahl says.

Rita Forden, vice-president of distinguished giving for the American Cancer Society's Illinois division, doesn't see it as competition. "It's different," she says. Her April 24 event sold out and netted \$2 million, the same as last year.

"We're not competing for the same dollar to do the same thing," Ms. Forden says. Corporations, she adds, "are very philanthropic—they find a way" to support more than one cause."

But there is a pecking order to what they'll support, based on the power wielded by the employees doing the asking.

This year's Red or White Ball, hosted by Steppenwolf Theatre Company's auxiliary board and priced at \$125 per ticket, grossed \$90,500. The proceeds were on par with last year but a significant drop from pre-recession levels of about \$120,000, says Brooke Walters, director of major gifts at the theater.

One big reason: Corporate sponsorships plunged to about \$10,000, down from \$50,000 to \$70,000 in past years. "It's due to where (auxiliary board members) sit in their company," she says. "Their philanthropies and interests weren't ranked high enough

on the list to get approval.”

The auxiliary board is trying to take up the slack by partnering with younger companies. Groupon Inc., the online discount provider headed by 29-year-old founder Andrew Mason, was a sponsor of this year's event.

But next year, it is considering just holding a party after Steppenwolf's trustees gala, rather than its own separate event.

The \$1,000-per-ticket Steppenwolf trustee gala, scheduled for May 8, is on track to gross about \$1 million, in line with last year but about 20% below pre-recession levels, Ms. Walters says. Fewer sponsor tables sold at the \$25,000 level, and more sold at the \$10,000 and \$15,000 levels.

#### **MOVING THE PARTY**

To keep attendance up, Steppenwolf dropped the ticket price to \$1,000 from \$1,500. To get the most out of every dollar, for the first time in its 19-year histo-

ry, the gala will be held in a space other than the theater. The move, to a warehouse space donated by a vendor, will save about 23% on party costs.

“You have to be nimble,” Ms. Walters says. “For us, the days of selling out the benefit a month in advance are past.”

The spring season has become more competitive as guests parse out their commitments. “People may have done both Friday and Saturday (benefits) in the past, and now they're doing one per weekend,” she says.

But not all non-profits are sweating the recession. Some are partying as though it's still 2005.

The Midwest Region of Unicef has raised \$6.5 million in three years for its Accelerated Child Survival Initiative to reduce deaths from preventable causes.

The campaign was launched in January 2007, right before the recession. “We always knew it was an ambitious goal,” says Laura

Geiger, development officer for its Midwest region.

By April, Unicef had raised, via benefits and donations, \$6.1 million. The final stretch of the campaign was its Message of Hope gala that month.

“We had more sponsors than last year. We sold more tables than we did last year,” Ms. Geiger says of the \$350-per-ticket gala. Paddles raised at auction garnered \$105,000, compared with \$80,000 last year.

Ms. Geiger credits the obvious need: Each day, 24,000 children around the world die of preventable causes.

The party may be “a fun night out—dancing, the auction and time to interact socially”—but people open their wallets because of the heart-tugging cause.

“It's very clear why people are there,” she says.

**Contact:** [life@chicagobusiness.com](mailto:life@chicagobusiness.com)

### **“THEIR PHILANTHROPIES AND INTERESTS WEREN'T RANKED HIGH ENOUGH ON THE LIST TO GET APPROVAL.”**

[Brooke Walters of Steppenwolf Theatre, on the drop in corporate giving to its young auxiliary board]



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Randy Holgate, a vice-president at **Erikson Institute**, says the organization is aiming for nice, but not too lavish, parties.