

HOW TO RUN A GALA

This is a To-Do list for a large, elaborate gala, so if you are planning a smaller event, please don't panic when looking at all these steps. You will not need to worry about some of these details. We hope this will be helpful!

One Year in Advance:

Form a Gala committee:

Form a Gala committee. Your committee would likely be fragile X family members, their friends, and any other interested individuals. Ask potential committee members to, at a minimum, commit to buying or selling a table at the gala. You might choose to have an honorary committee and an honorary chair (someone well-known in the community). Some people think it lends more credibility to the cause to have an honorary committee of VIPs; others prefer to see a list of committee members who have some connection with the cause.

Set the Date:

Meeting with the hotel (or other location) you've chosen and ask the staff for two or three possible dates. Call other hotels with ballrooms of comparable size and ask them what they have scheduled for those dates. If it's something like the Down Syndrome Society or Special Olympics, that's not okay. If it's a convention of home builders, that's okay. It's almost impossible to find a night with no conflict.

Call local magazines/newspapers and speak with the person who writes the "calendar" column, to see what's on their calendar so far and what they had last year that same week. Many charities have their event the same week each year. Remember: a conflict with another big event can kill your event.

Rooms for out of Town Guests:

Once you settle on a hotel and date, ask them to reserve a block of rooms for out of town guests. Also reserve a block of rooms at a couple of less expensive hotels (which you may have to release at a certain date). Send out a list of hotels with rooms blocked to "out-of-towners" as their RSVPs come in. Setting up hotels with blocks of rooms is a good job to give to another volunteer.

Co Chair:

If you decide to have a co-chair, it is nice to have someone well-known in the community who will ask friends to come, write personal notes on the invitations, and be responsible for buying or selling tables. You can have as many co-chairs as you want.

Emcee or Master of Ceremonies:

This is an important decision. Sometimes an emcee will talk on and on, imposing no discipline on himself, other participants, or the audience. This can lead to a long, boring night. It is important to choose a pro, someone who commands respect. A good emcee

will spend time learning about FRAXA and connecting with other personalities who will attend.

On the night of the event, nothing should be left to chance. The emcee needs to be strict about the length of each item on the agenda. It is a good idea to have some of the program completed just after people sit down, before the first course. Have the hotel serve bread and wine so that people would have something to munch and sip on during the proceedings.

Program/Speakers:

Develop a theme for the evening and identify and invite speakers or award recipients.

Gift Bags:

If you decide to have gift bags, you should assign a committee solely to that task. It is difficult to get items donated so a committee needs to focus on that task alone. Rather than goody bags, you can simply give out favors or gifts. One year, guests received umbrellas with the FRAXA logo; another year they got decks of cards with the logo.

Photographer:

Line up a photographer for the event.

Budget:

Work up a proposed budget. At the Washington Gala we offered 3 categories of tables: Sponsors: \$3,500; Patrons: \$5,000; Benefactors: \$10,000. You can also sell individual tickets at several different prices.

Sponsorships:

As soon as a gala committee is in place, each committee member should begin writing letters to contacts who can be potential sponsors.

Publicity:

This is difficult. Consider giving this task to a volunteer who has media, marketing, or advertising experience.

Six Months in Advance:

Hold-the Date letter or card:

The Hold-the-date communication should be sent out at least 4 months before the event.

Invitations:

Find a good printer, and order more invitations than you think you will use. Send invitations to committee members and ask them to send them to friends with personal notes written on them. Personal notes can make a huge difference in the response. Also, before you invitations to committee members, put their initials on the backs of the enclosure cards, so that if they come back in with either a contribution or money for

tickets, you can identify whose contact they are. You'll need to decide what portion of each ticket to the dinner is not tax-deductible.

It is best to handwrite addresses on the invitations. You might want to have several committee members get together to address all the envelopes in one afternoon/evening.

The invitations should be sent 7 or 8 weeks in advance of the event.

It's also a good idea to have a lot of extra invitations, because the next year's chair should have a bunch to send to prospective sponsors, printers, florists, the hotel, etc. to give those people a flavor of what kind of event you expect to have.

Send out thank you letters as responses and contributions come in, or arrange with Katie Clapp to have this done at FRAXA's headquarters.

Program:

When you choose and make a deal with your printer for invitations, tell him that you will also need a simple table program done, but that you will not be able to give him the copy for that until the last minute. People sometimes decide to buy tables at the last minute, and they really want to be listed on the program.

You may decide to go all out and do a big-time program, with advertisers, etc. If so, this should be the responsibility of another sub-committee member because it is a fundraising project within a larger fundraiser.

The Menu:

Meet with the banquet manager at the hotel. Tell her/him exactly what you have in mind for format, menu, audio-visual equipment, piano, etc. Ask for him/her to work up some menus. When you get them, pick what you think you want, narrowing down each course to two things, and get the prices on those.

Flowers:

Get bids from three florists and prototypes from the two you like best. The prototypes can often make the choice easy. A low mixed arrangement of seasonal fresh flowers is best ... something you are able to see over so you can talk to guests easily.

It is important to have someone you trust available when the flowers are delivered because sometimes the flowers can be awful looking. In that case, ask the florist to take them back and re-do them. You can and should expect the flower arrangements to be of the same quality as the prototype you saw.

Volunteers:

Assign volunteers to various jobs including people to staff a table in the foyer with the table cards and dinner lists. Get people who can think fast for this job, since last minute complications always arise. You will also need volunteers to direct people to the dinner from the reception, greet people at the hotel lobby, set place cards and programs at the tables, and stuff goody bags.

One month ahead:

Finalize the Menu:

Have a tasting dinner at the hotel or restaurant. This is a serious working dinner with the banquet manager/staff. Taste samples of various things including wines, appetizers, salads and desserts to make your final decision on the menu.

Place/Table Cards:

You can do the table cards (the cards with the names and table numbers that each person receives when they arrive) on the computer; choose an attractive and readable font. As soon as you start receiving RSVP's, work on the cards daily so that you are not left with a huge job at the end.

You can either decide the seating at each table, which means you will need a place card for each person, or you can leave that up to the guests.

Keep your lists well organized:

- Invitation list: Alphabetical list of those invited
- List of those who are coming, with the address and the date when the thank-you letter was written.
- Those who are not coming but sent a contribution, with the address and the date on which the thank-you letter was written.
- Place Card List with the names as they should be on the place and table cards.
- Table List by table numbers: i.e. Table 12, with the list of all the people sitting at that table. This list will change each and every hour during the last couple of days.
- Table List by people: Alphabetical list: i.e. Joe Blow: table 12.

This job can be simplified by using a good database or spreadsheet program.

Two weeks before the gala:

Take the draft of the program to the printer. You can have everything final except the list of sponsors, patrons, and benefactors. You will likely get more of those the very last minute, so warn the printer that the program will need to be a rush job.

One week before the gala:

- Give the hotel your estimated count, based on the RSVP's you already have and your best guess of what may still come in.
- Make a first pass at the seating. The hotel will send you a table plan, so that you can see which table is where. Tables of VIPs can be in the center of the room, rather than up at the very front. That way, more people will get to sit "close" to the honored guests. Also put some "insiders" in the back row. We actually put

ourselves (committee chair) and some good friends (including some big contributors) back there. That way, when the other people in the back row see others who are “important” there, they feel better about their seat. The whole seating task is pretty overwhelming that last couple of days.

- Talk to the audio-visual person at the hotel about your plans for the evening. Good audio is crucial. Make sure the lights dimmed, except of course for the podium, during the program.
- Send a time-line schedule to the hotel, telling exactly what you want to happen during the evening and when. If some VIP’s are going to be introduced, but not on the program and not going to the podium, be sure to tell the person who does the lights -- or the video, if you’re using big screens -- where they will be sitting. People like to see them.
- Take the final draft of the program to the printer.
- Call the florist to give her/him the number of table arrangements you think you want. You can add, but not subtract, later.

The day of the gala:

- Volunteers/committee members should be at the hotel in the afternoon to assemble the goody bags. Volunteers/committee members should be ready to direct guests into the ballroom, once dinner is announced. Usually, a hotel staff person will go through the crowd with a gong, which is fine; but people are slow to leave where they are and go somewhere else. It’s important, though, to get the program started on time.
- Print the table cards (you might prefer to do this ahead of time so you only have to print last minute changes that day).
- Print lots of copies of the table list so that all volunteers and committee members have one handy.
- Pick up the programs, which the volunteers will put on the plates at the last minute. Be sure someone holds onto the extra programs to use in the future.

Follow-up:

- Write thank-you letters to all the major players.
- Send a financial report to your committee. People are dying to know how much the gala made.
- Send any pictures you have to the people who should receive them. I sent photos, with little handwritten notes, to about 50 people. That takes a lot of time, but people seem to appreciate receiving them.

You are done! Celebrate!