
Putting on a House Party

By KIM KLEIN

One of the easiest special events, and sometimes one of the most lucrative, is the common house party. In some ways, it seems silly to describe how to do a house party since anyone who has ever organized a birthday party, school picnic, or anniversary celebration already knows most of what there is to know about putting on a house party. However, sometimes the events that seem easiest are fraught with pitfalls. I recently attended three house parties in a row that were dismal failures financially. For these reasons, this seems like a good time to remind readers of the obvious and not-so-obvious details about producing a successful house party.

WHAT IT IS

First, the basic description of a house party: A person invites friends and acquaintances to a party at their house to educate them about the work of a nonprofit group and ask them to make a contribution. (More than one person can host a single house party, increasing the guest list and the people available to do the work.)

The party is also a place for the guests to see old friends, meet new people, and eat good food, which provides a cordial atmosphere for the host to make the request for funds. Finally, a house party allows someone not familiar with the group to learn about it, ask questions, and get some personal attention without being obligated to give. People can either give a very small gift or not give at all without embarrassing themselves, and they can attend the house party without paying to get in.

THE USES OF HOUSE PARTIES

A house party is a good way to raise consciousness about the issues your organization is addressing. House parties are best used to explain a complicated issue to

many people at once, answer questions about it, and provide the specific information people want. In the early days of the United Farm Workers movement, for example, house parties were used to explain the concept of the farmworkers union and the plight of migrant farmworkers to mainly white, nonagricultural people who were likely to be sympathetic to the issues but had little concrete information about them.

A second use of a house party is to allow a group of people to meet someone important, such as a candidate for office, a well-known activist, a member of the African National Congress, etc. This person gives a testimonial or asserts a particular viewpoint, and the host describes what people can do to respond (such as vote, give money, boycott, give money, demonstrate, give money).

No matter what else you ask people to do at a house party, you should ask them to give money. It is the only thing they can do right on the spot, and it is usually the most passive action, requiring the least amount of work on their part. The main purpose of a house party, then, is to expand an organization's donor base.

STEPS TO PUTTING ON A HOUSE PARTY

There are six steps to putting on a house party:

1. Find the person who is willing to host it at his or her house and to take on other responsibilities related to the event.
2. Prepare the guest list.
3. Design and send the invitation.
4. Make follow-up calls.
5. Choreograph the event, particularly the pitch.
6. Follow up and evaluate.

The Host

The host of a house party has several responsibilities, the least of which is providing the house and food. First, the host creates the guest list, inviting anyone he or she thinks might be interested in the organization or the topic being discussed. At the party, the host or another person gives an appropriate description of the organization and the issues. Then, the host makes a pitch for money. It is important that the host has already contributed money, as well as the party, because the host must ask people to join him or her in making a gift to the organization.

The ideal host is someone close enough to the organization to understand the importance of the group and be willing to conquer their fear of asking friends for money, but not so close as to have all their friends already be donors. A common flaw of house parties is that they draw on a small group of supporters: the same people end up attending several house parties for one organization and the organization does not succeed in expanding its donor base.

Prepare the Guest List

Once someone has volunteered to host a party, the organization's staff should help that person decide who should be invited. A house party can have any number of people, but it works best when there are at least 12 guests and not more than 50. Figure out how many people the house can comfortably accommodate. If you are planning a presentation, you will need to make sure most of the people can sit down at that time. If you are only planning a brief pitch, then having enough seats will not be so important.

Generally you need to invite three times as many people as you want to attend. In addition, there should be one person from the organization (such as a board member, volunteer, or staff person) for every five to eight guests. These people will mingle with the guests, talking about the organization and answering questions in a personal way. These people should be included in the total numbers.

Obviously, start with the host's friends and relatives. Don't forget neighbors. Think about people from church, synagogue or other religious or spiritual affiliation, social clubs, and work. Except for those people specifically invited to mingle and represent the organization, don't invite many people who are already donors. If you want to use the house party as an opportunity to upgrade some donors, only invite those who could be asked to give more money than they currently do.

Design and Send the Invitation

The invitation does not have to be fancy, and it can be

printed at an instant-print copy shop, so expense shouldn't be an issue. For groups with access to desktop publishing programs, good-looking invitations can be turned out quite inexpensively.

The invitation should reflect something about the host and about the crowd being invited. This will make people want to attend. Whether serious or light, educational or assuming knowledge on the part of the invitee, the invitation should always include the following:

- **An indication that people will be asked for money.** "Bring your checkbook" is the most direct way to make this known. You might also say, "A chance to learn about _____ and contribute to this important work." Or, "As we enter our tenth year, your financial support is more important than ever."
- **A way for people to make a donation without coming to the party.** On the return card include the option, "I can't come, but I want to help. Enclosed is my donation."
- **A suggestion that people bring friends.** Ask people to RSVP so you will know how many are coming.
- **Clear directions to the house.** If finding the place is at all confusing, provide a map. Include the phone number of the host under the directions.

Make Follow-Up Calls

To assure an adequate turnout, it is important that the host follow up the written invitation with phone calls to prospective guests. Some hosts may feel that calling people applies too much pressure and that their friends will resent it. The reality is that in most people's busy lives an invitation can easily get lost in the piles of paper that accumulate at home and office. Without a phone call, people often forget about the party. Rather than resenting the call, most people appreciate the reminder.

Choreograph the Event

Where most parties fail is in not having thought through exactly what will happen at the event. To avoid this danger, imagine you are a guest at the event and play over in your mind what will happen.

You drive up to the house. Is it obvious where to park? This can be important if the host shares a driveway with people not attending the party, if there is a hidden ditch near the house, or if the neighbors are the kind that are likely to call the police about a guest parked too near the crosswalk. Is the house obvious? The house number evident? Is there a porch light? Is there a sign saying, "The _____ house party here"? This is especially important in rural communities where homes can be off the street, and in big apartment complexes where it may be

confusing to find the right apartment number.

You come in to the house or apartment. Is it obvious where to put your coat? If not, someone needs to be stationed at the door to take coats or show where they belong. The greeter should also point out the bathroom if it is not obvious.

You look around for people you know and make your way to the food. Is there a traffic jam at the food table? The table should be pulled out from the wall so people can serve themselves from all sides of it. The drinks should be on a separate table from the food, to encourage people to move on from the food or from the drinks. If possible, there should be several small platters of food, rather than a few large platters, so people can help themselves from any point around the table.

Are the plates big enough? People don't want to feel that they need several helpings to get full, or to stay hungry because they are too embarrassed to keep going back for more food. People returning to the food table create a traffic jam, and people feeling hungry create a non-money-giving atmosphere. The food should be easy to eat while standing up — finger food rather than something that needs a fork and knife. And there shouldn't be anything that would be a disaster if spilled (such as red wine on light-colored carpeting, chili on the couch).

Once you get your food, you look for a place to sit. Are there enough chairs? Make sure no chair is sitting alone or obstructing people coming in and out of the entrance.

THE SPECIAL MOMENT: THE PITCH

Everything that happens at the house party should be built around the pitch. Arrange ahead of time that at least two and not more than four people will respond when the host says, "I hope you will make a donation." These people pull out checkbooks, or hand over checks to members of the organization. They don't have to be ostentatious about it, but a few people have to lead the way in giving money.

Some people object to this practice, claiming that it imposes too much pressure or is disingenuous. However, a little more thought will show that it is the considerate thing to do. Few people have the self-confidence to be the first to do anything. When the host asks for money, many people are prepared to give, but everyone has a brief attack of anxiety. "Perhaps this isn't when you give the money," they think, or, "Perhaps everyone else already turned in their money and I will look odd if I try to give my money now." Having some people go first gives permission for everyone else who wants to give to do it now.

Time the pitch so that the most people will be there when it is made. This is usually an hour into the party. The

host calls for people's attention. The members of the organization discreetly get envelopes ready, and the two to four "plants" space themselves around the room. The host introduces himself or herself and welcomes everyone. If there is a presentation, the host introduces the presenter. (If there is more than one host, such as a couple, or a group, they should take turns talking so it is clear that both or all are involved.)

After the presentation, the host must be the one to give the pitch. If the presenter is a famous person or somehow special to the work of the group, that person can sometimes make a formal request for money, followed by the host saying, "I hope you will join me in helping this important cause." It doesn't matter if the host is nervous or doesn't like asking for money. The proceeds will be much lower without a pitch from the party sponsor.

Sometimes people argue that doing the party — loaning the house, fixing the food, giving the time — should indicate the host's interest. Indeed they do. But in order for the guests to give money, the host must also say that he or she gives money and wants anyone who agrees with him or her to do the same.

How the pitch is made determines how the money will be collected. This is also decided ahead of time. The best way to get the most money at the party is to pass around envelopes immediately after the host speaks. Then the host can say, "Please put your donation in the envelope we are providing and place it in the basket over there," and point to a place. Or the host can say, "You can hand me your envelope, or give it to any of the people wearing a carnation." In any case, tell people how and when to give the money.

AVOIDING FAILURE

I referred to three house parties I had attended that were failures. The first failed because the host had not made any follow-up calls after sending the invitations, and only five people showed up.

The other two failed because they had not been properly planned. In one, the host said, "I hope you will all think about making a gift to this group, which is my favorite." Then, without missing a beat, he said, "Now that the fundraising part is over, let's eat, drink, and have fun." People did exactly as they were told. For a few seconds they thought about giving a gift, then headed for the food. No envelopes were present, and no method of collection was obvious.

At the third party, the hosts showed a videotape about the group, then took the tape out of the TV monitor and went into the kitchen. People sat around chatting about

the tape, then got up to get drinks and food. After a while, the hosts reemerged and went on with the party. People could be heard asking: “Are we supposed to give money?” or, “What are you supposed to do with the money?” Perhaps out of fear of being rude or out of embarrassment at not knowing what to do, they did not ask the hosts.

In all cases, the parties raised almost no money and left people feeling that house parties are a waste of time. They are if not done properly.

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

After each party, take some time to evaluate what went well and what could have been done better. Particularly if you have used a standard presentation, reflect on its length and relevance, whether it was possible to get a discussion going, and so on.

Someone from the organization should write thank-you notes to everyone who gave money, and these people should be put on the organization’s mailing list. It would be a nice gesture for the host to also write thank-you notes to those who gave. If the host failed to make a pitch at the party, then the organization should immediately send an appeal letter to everyone on the guest list. If some people gave, go over the list of donors with the host. If there are people who the host thinks would have given but didn’t take the opportunity or forgot, he or she should call them. If the host does not want to do that, the group should send them an appeal letter as soon as possible.

Like all fundraising strategies, house parties only work if someone actually asks for the money. Otherwise a house party is just a party — fun but no funds.

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