



Mission-Centered Cultivation Receptions



Instead of starting a new special event, engage prospective donors with your key philanthropic priorities.



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Engaged Generosity



Why a Reception?

Instead of starting a new special event, start hosting small, mission-centered receptions that engage prospective donors with your key philanthropic priorities.

These gatherings work best for prospects who are connected to your organization but have not responded to attempts at individual meetings with you or your CEO. Many feel comfortable in a group setting and may then be open to hearing your message and agreeing to a follow-up visit.



The Host

Recruit a host or host couple to hold the event in their home or club, as a reception or a garden party depending on the weather.

The host's role is to (1) hold the event in their home or club, including paying the expenses; (2) help develop the invitation list and encourage attendance; and (3) during the evening, give a testimonial and deliver a call to action to the attendees. A great host is someone you are cultivating for their own gift—and who may decide to announce it at the event.



Planning the Evening

Timing and venue: A weekday evening or Sunday afternoon in the host's home or club is best. A garden party works well if the venue and weather suit it, and so does an indoor reception if the host's living room is large enough for everyone to stand and listen to a short talk.

A few guidelines for the evening:

- Keep it a standing reception, not a sit-down, with a few seats for older or disabled guests
- Serve heavy hors d'oeuvres as dinner, with non-alcoholic drinks, beer and wine—or cocktails, if that suits your area and organization

Invitation list and attendance: The ideal size is 20 to 60 people. These are potential leadership and major-gift prospects, so you don't need hundreds of attendees the way a gala does—you want scale, but not so many that you and your leadership can't talk with everyone. Use your yield rate for events: if you need to invite 200 to net 20, do that. If 20 major prospects attend, the event is worth having.

- Start the list with previous donors and others you know are connected to your organization
- Add suspects you hope to engage, and share the list with your host(s)
- Ask the hosts to add names and say which invitees they will contact personally
- Build in that expectation of the hosts—helping with attendance and follow-up—from the beginning

Even the best of these events requires follow-up calls, usually by philanthropy or foundation staff, to yield strong attendance.



The Program

This outline has worked in various parts of the country and in various venues. We recommend against PowerPoint slides or videos: you lose eye contact with attendees and change the tone of the event.

1. Arrival, mixing and mingling (60 minutes)

- Guests check in at a name-tag table; a staff member monitors how many have arrived before starting the program
- Food and drinks are served while philanthropy staff make sure the CEO, dean, president or other leader meets targeted prospects

2. Speaking program (15–20 minutes)

- Welcome by the host(s): they thank their guests and endorse the organization, sharing why they are involved
- Speaker #1 (CEO, dean or president): the overarching mission, connected to the next speaker
- Speaker #2 (physician, researcher or other leader in mission delivery): an exciting breakthrough, new program or success that is the focus of the philanthropy program
- Thanks and call to action by the host(s): “We won’t be able to fully realize this exciting vision without philanthropic support. Sally from the Foundation is here tonight. When she and her team reach out, please take their call and consider a tour, visit or meeting—and a gift to make this great program a reality.”

3. Coffee, dessert and conversation: The host(s) invite everyone to stay for coffee and dessert, and the speakers take questions. Philanthropy staff ask prospects what they thought of the presentation and seek to confirm next steps.



After the Event

Follow-up is the most important part of the plan. Before the event, schedule a debrief for 3 to 10 days afterward with the CEO, president or dean, the speaker and the host(s) to share what they heard from the prospects who attended. Keep the attendee list on a spreadsheet or report, with next steps and new gifts, up to date.

At regular intervals after the event, update the hosts on its impact—for example, new prospects engaged through their event, new funds raised from attendees, and who has agreed to host a similar event.

And of course, have the CEO, president or dean send the hosts a handwritten thank-you note the day after the event.

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