



Without Black-Tie Events, Charities Are Pivoting in the Age of COVID

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Many know the charity gala rubric: let the Champagne flow, deploy an emcee in full throttle, and watch competing auction bids ricochet around the ballroom. Then, bingo: a good cause excitedly smashes its fundraising record.

The mingling, socially undistanced soiree during the great pause of COVID-19? Not so much.

With the black-tie blackout following myriad postponements such as Vancouver Art Gallery's Summer Gala (2019's fundraising tally: \$750,000) and Crystal Ball Gala (which scooped \$3.8 million for BC Children's Hospital), charities are muddling through an era of tightened giving as people deal with losing a loved one, scramble to maintain their livelihood, or look inward after lockdown. With charitable demands unabated, charities are adopting an air of reinvention to connect with donors.

Take the way the spring and summer's Fighting COVID Together online auction was pulled together at whiplash speed—with auctioneer Howard Blank—in aid of charities including the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre and the VGH & UBC Hospital Foundation. "Not a superpolished auction but innovative as heck," explains co-creator Tracey Wade, who helps fundraise for Coast Mental Health's Courage to Come Back Awards Gala and the Crystal Ball. "Most importantly, it was at no cost to the charities involved. And in the early days of uncertainty and chaos, I thought this a defining characteristic—no dollar would go to waste."

Those uncertain and chaotic days also spurred charities to reach out to identify changing needs. Scrapping its usual annual Mother's Day Lunch in May, Vancouver's Cause We Care Foundation—the charity that helps single mothers in need—reacted to food security worries. “We quickly pivoted our Mother's Day outreach to address this issue,” says founder Andrea Thomas Hill, adding that the charity raised \$60,000 for 750 food packages after partnering with grocery delivery service Legends Haul. “We have been around for more than 10 years but remain a grassroots, hands-on organization personally invested in every aspect of the work we do, so trust plays an important part in giving.”

Wade agrees charities are doubling down on long-term engagement. Also the chair of the BCSPCA's annual Offleashed Gala, she stresses that the animal welfare group focuses on education rather than raising money (the last event's financial injection was, however, a significant \$778,000) and has never relied on just a single night but strives to continually keep donors and corporate partners in the loop. “My goal long-term is to save as many animal lives as possible,” says Wade, who has been involved in the event since it launched five years ago. “You do that by slowly building education into every corner of our communities so that every child, neighbour, colleague, person knows they have the power to have conversations that could save a life —friendraise, not fundraise.”

While there's nothing like heading into Offleashed's playful Cuddle Lounge to pet a puppy or kitten in real life, this year's family-friendly event—online like the rest of the world—is still shaped to feel like a celebration. Designed to unite the community, it will feature virtual furry hugs, an interactive section for children, and videos to make it as tangible as possible. “I know that the core values of this particular event will not get lost,” she adds.

Transparency into how much organizations that are unable to gather folk in their finery might lose might even help, suggests one of Vancouver's most notable philanthropists, Ryan Beedie. The president of Beedie Development, who gave, among other campaigns, \$50 million to create Beedie Luminaries, a new scholarship program for B.C. students, believes charities could consider asking individuals and companies to give the same amount they would normally for a ticket or sponsorship—even without the physical gala or event. Put simply, he says, “most donate for the good of the organization” rather than to party into the witching hours.

Given the restrictions of COVID life, from global travel to everyday shopping, he points out that not everyone's bank account (or paycheck) is diminishing. Obviously, many people have been severely impacted by COVID, but Beedie adds, “There are many others who have not and have stable incomes ... and actually have an enhanced capacity to give.”

All agree that even more of these types of philanthropic efforts will be needed to offset sluggishness in donations and increasing needs in the community. “For those who have the means to, now is the most important time to give,” opines Beedie. “It is too easy to say or expect that government can step in and fill the void. There’s a limit.”

Thomas Hill sees giving back as key to ensure communities “keep healthy, strong, and vital.” And as almost every charitable program provides support that’s essential to someone, Wade concludes, “If we collectively stop caring about those in our communities, then where do we go from there?”
