Major Gift Events: Six Problems We Can Fix

Anne Murphy · Empowered Fundraiser Consulting · November 8, 2026

Events are a center of gravity in nonprofit fundraising. They contribute to culture, engagement, and philanthropy. They give donors a chance to meet the people doing the work, hear from each other, and tell us what they care about.

A major gift event needs an organized system, clear communication, and guests who know you really want them there. That work starts with the guest list and continues after the last person leaves.

1. Low response

Yes or no, it's crickets.

Read the invitation from the donor's side. Can they tell what you're bringing people together to talk about, why you thought of them, and how to reply? Make the date, time, and location easy to find. Give them one clear way to respond and tell them what to expect when they arrive.

For the people you especially want there, have someone they know reach out personally. Give that person a real reason to call or write. A donor who asked about the new program last spring should hear that the program director will be there and would like to meet them. That's a reason to come, and it tells the donor you remember the conversation.

2. No idea who's coming

No one knows where the spreadsheet is or who has access.

Pick one place for the team to check the guest list and agree on who updates it. For each guest, record whether they've replied, who knows them, any promises you've made, and who is responsible for the next touch. Make sure the person greeting guests can see the latest list before the doors open.

Agree on what happens when someone says yes, says no, or hasn't replied. A guest who declines may still want to meet the program director. Someone who hasn't replied may need a call from the host. The MOXXEE Invitation Studio demo shows one way to organize those responses and next steps.

3. Low show-up rate

There's a stretch between the yes and the event when a guest can forget what made them want to come. Give them something to look forward to. Share a short preview of the discussion or let them know who you'd like them to meet.

A day-before reminder should make it easy to get there. Include the entrance, parking or access details, start and end times, and a number to call if plans change. When a guest arrives, have someone ready to greet them by name and help them find the person they came to meet.

4. Wrong people in the room

Choose the purpose of the gathering before you make the guest list. If you're asking for input on a new initiative, invite people whose experience or questions could change your thinking. If you want donors to get to know leadership, give them time to talk. A packed program can eat up the very time you brought people together for.

For each priority guest, write down why you want them there and who will reach out. Look at the mix of donors, prospects, hosts, and staff before you send invitations. Afterward, track attendance and guest mix alongside what you know about giving history and potential. Those figures help you understand whom you reached. The conversations tell you what to do next.

5. No one knows what to accomplish in donor conversations

Give the host and team a short briefing they'll actually read. For each priority guest, include the relationship so far, what the donor has told you they care about, and one introduction or question worth making time for.

Decide who will make those introductions. If a donor wanted to understand how families use a new space, introduce them to someone who can talk about that firsthand. Leave room to hear what interests the donor now. Their answer may change the follow-up you planned. The donor salon guide walks through how to prepare hosts and make room for conversation.

6. Lackluster follow-up

Draft the messages and assign responsibilities in advance, then add what you learn from each conversation.

Set the debrief time before the event. While the conversations are fresh, ask the team what they heard, what they promised, and who should follow up. A thank-you can mention the question a guest asked. A follow-up can send the information you promised or offer a time to continue the conversation. Someone who couldn't come may still want that introduction. Use the Donor Event Debrief to turn the team's notes into contact reports and next steps.

With limited budgets and staff bandwidth, few nonprofits can afford to plan a major gift event that doesn't serve the right relationships. Before you put another one on the calendar, look at which conversations happened, what you learned, and whether the team followed through. That's how you decide what's worth doing again.