Organizing a Charity Dinner

Hey! So I prepped this little “how-to” guide describing what we did to put on our NHS Charity Dinner benefiting UNICEF last year. I’m gonna apologize in advance for it being a tad long, but I just want to make sure I gave you all the advice you might need.

Food & Drinks

So if you’re going to be hosting a dinner, then the first thing you need to figure out is what grub you’re going to be serving. I think there’s pretty much only 3 options:

- Cater the dinner
- Buy & cook the food yourself
- Have a “pot luck” where everybody brings a little something

If the purpose of your gig is to raise money, then you’re probably only going to be able to get away with one of the first two options; people generally aren’t going to want to pay money and then have to bring their own food.

For our dinner, we hired a catering company [whose contact info is at the bottom of this page]. The advantage of going this route is that the food is priced “per person” so if you know right away how much profit you’re going to make. For example, if you ordered a meal that was $7 a pop and you charged $15 for tickets, then you know you’re going to walk away with $8 a person. (Well, that’s not exactly how it works…I’ll break down the actual cost structure a little later.)

Regardless of how you get the food for your dinner, I would buy all the drinks and paper products yourself, as that will definitely be cheaper than buying them from a catering company. I’d also consider buying a large cake from Costco or Sam’s; they are cheap and can feed a lot of people.

Tables & Chairs

There’s also an issue of how formal you want the dinner to be. As far as costs are concerned, this will determine whether or not you want to use those lovely long rectangular tables in the ISC or if you want to rent tables and chairs. As we were going for a somewhat dressy affair, we rented round tables and chairs from the same company that catered our event which made it rather convenient.

Regardless of what type of tables you will use, you will also have to decide whether or not you want any table decorations. We purchased plastic table cloths and made small ornamental table centerpieces. Candles are always a nice touch. Of course all these things add up, but they can make for a more enjoyable experience.
Entertainment

After you’ve hammered all that out, you’ll have to figure out how to keep your guests entertained during the whole affair – having a bunch of people just sitting around eating dinner can actually get a little dull really fast. We had some IA band members come in and play a couple numbers, had a small group of ISA members put on a dance, and hired a magician/comedian for the grand finale. Although we did not pay any of the IA students who performed during our event, we did give them free tickets. Of course, if you have 10 people performing at your event and you give them all free $20 tickets, then that’s $200 you’ve just potentially lost. We were lucky to sell enough tickets (and get a few generous parent donations) to be able to do this.

As our event was aimed raising money for UNICEF, we also prepared a brief presentation highlighting some of the things that UNICEF does around the world. You may want to consider putting together something similar for your event. We set it up so we had some mellow music playing in the background during the beginning of dinner (using the sound system in the ISC), and then as people finished up eating, we started with the live entertainment and then finished up with the presentation.

If you are going to be using any live entertainment, you will probably want to talk to whoever’s in charge of the drama stuff to see about setting up the stage. Do make sure to do this well in advance, because this was actually something that I forgot to do until the last minute and it was really hard finding someone who was available to stay after and set it up.

Cost Structure

After you’ve sat down and planned all of this out, you’ll need to figure out whether or not you can actually make money. For our charity dinner, the cost structure was roughly as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
<th>Per Person Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>$600.00</td>
<td>$7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dessert &amp; Drinks</td>
<td>$40.00</td>
<td>$0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Products</td>
<td>$50.00</td>
<td>$0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorations</td>
<td>$80.00</td>
<td>$1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tickets</td>
<td>$20.00</td>
<td>$0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring magician</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
<td>$3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1090.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>$13.63</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because we figured it was going to cost us $13-14 a person, we charged $20 per ticket, and made a total profit of about $500. This is going to be important to
figure out beforehand because just about everything except for the catering is pretty much a fixed cost; it’s going to cost the same amount to decorate the ISC or to hire entertainment regardless of how many tickets you sell. As such, we determined that we would need to sell at least 40 tickets just to break even. The revenues from the first 20 tickets pretty much covered the cost of all the decorations and entertainment, and the revenues from the second 20 tickets covered the cost of feeding the first 40 people. (We actually ended up selling 80 tickets.) Depending on how your cost structure pans out – and specifically, whether or not you’re going to hire entertainment – will determine what’s the minimum number of tickets you need to sell.

Selling Tickets

Obviously, getting 80 high schoolers to fork over $20 each was a little tough. Our dinner was being put on by the NHS, and the majority of the people who bought tickets were NHS members. We also contacted Mrs. Miner about sending emails to all the IA’s parents advertising the event. As far as advertising goes, you’ll want to post a ton of flyers, make a lot of PA announcements, and I even went around to all of the classes to personally ask [read: beg] people to buy tickets. If you go the latter route, you’ll probably want to do something like go to all of the 9th grade foreign language classes, 10th grade lit classes, 11th grade history classes, and 12th grade math classes, to make sure you reach out to all of the students. Of course, that will entail getting all of those teachers’ permission to interrupt their classes for the 2 or 3 minutes it’ll take to give your little spiel and hand out any flyers.

Even after doing all of that, we still found it a little hard to sell enough tickets, and so we talked the 12th grade lit teachers into offering (20pts) extra credit for everyone who bought a ticket. I’ll admit it’s a little tough talking teachers into giving extra credit, and we did kind of luck up because Mrs. Ed was the NHS advisor in addition to being a lit teacher.

If you do go the route of offering extra credit to people who purchase tickets, then you will need some way of keeping track of who all buys tickets. You could have them sign their names on a list of some sort; we had everyone put their name on their own index card, and we kept a box with everyone’s index cards in it.

Behind the Scenes

Before you can set a date for your dinner you’ll need to talk to Mrs. Van Dusen about the availability of the ISC – it does get used for clubs, enrichments, etc afterschool and so you’ll have to firm things up with her beforehand. If you need a projector/screen for anything, Mrs. Miner, of course, is the one to ask.

When it actually comes to putting on your even you’ll need a small army of people to help you setup, collect tickets, serve dinner, and clean up afterwards. I had
a good 20-25 people (mostly NHS members) who volunteered to help out with all of that stuff.

Finally, when it comes to actually organizing the catering, purchasing the decorations, arranging all of the entertainment, and putting together any little presentations for your dinner, you might want to consider dishing out those responsibilities to other people, but if you do that then you’ll also have to stay on them to make sure they actually get stuff done. For our event, I personally did all of that work just because I thought it would be easier and less of a hassle.

As far as the actual tickets go, I had thought it would be best to make our own tickets, as that would be cheaper. I’ve attached a copy of what our tickets looked like, just to give you an idea. If you go to Staples or Office Max you can find perforated ticket cardstock that made things really easy.

Phew! Well that’s everything I can think of…if you need anything else please feel free to drop me a line. If you need help designing flyers or making tickets, let me know – professional publications are kind of a hobby of mine.

I’m sure all this seems like a lot, but to be perfectly honest putting on that charity dinner was really a lot of fun at the end of the day, especially knowing that it helped out such a good cause.

In any case, good luck with your event and I hope everything goes well!

All the best,

Kendrick G.

Contact Information

Hotz Catering
www.hotzcatering.com

Gordon Russ, Entertainer
gordonruss.com. (His website looks a little lame, but he wasn’t all that bad in person)
The International Academy
along with
The National Honor Society
proudly presents a
CHARITY DINNER
benefiting
The United Nations’ Children’s Fund

WHEN:    Friday, March 30
          7:00-9:30PM

WHERE:   International Academy
          In the ISC

COST:    $20 per person
          Cash or Check.
          Please make checks payable to the International Academy

WHY:     To raise funds for
          UNICEF, whose efforts
          have improved the lives of
          millions of children worldwide

One Night.
One Dinner.
You can make a difference
in a child’s life.

Tickets will be sold
A-days, during
BOTH lunches!

Lots of fun &
plenty of good
eats!

Featuring the following fine products:
Here is what one of our tickets looked like:

The International Academy
along with
The National Honor Society
proudly present a
CHARITY DINNER
benefiting
The United Nations Children's Fund

Friday
March 30, 2007
7:00PM
at the
International Academy
in the
ISC

Thank You
for Your Support!