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By Susan J. Levine

For 16 years, Kellman Brown Academy’s major fundraiser has been its annual dinner in April – a three-hour party with 350 attendees, lavish cocktails and *hors d’oeuvres*, and heartwarming speeches celebrating the contributions of our honorees and the accomplishments of our amazing K-8 Jewish Community Day School over the past year.

But this year, our traditional playbook was tossed out the window in March with the onslaught of Covid-19. The planning committee wrestled over what to do – postpone until June and hope the virus calmed enough to allow the “show” to go on as planned? Postpone until the fall and delay raising much needed funds? Venture into new and unknown (and scary) territory by hosting a virtual event with an uncertain outcome?

After much hand wringing and discussion, we took the plunge and decided to host a virtual event on the newly reserved June date. But how would we translate our in-person event to a successful virtual event? Who knew? But now that it’s over, we can honestly say that it worked out great… to the point that we may never be in-person again!

For us, the benefits far outweighed the difficulties. They included…

* ***Attendance****.*Attendance was up by nearly 50% – 529 clicked in that evening, and one week post-event we’ve notched over 1000 Facebook views and still climbing.
* ***Reach****.* Attendees came from far and wide instead of being confined to our local geography. Being virtual allowed us to connect with alumni residing in distant places (both nationally and internationally), family members of honorees who would not have come otherwise, and past supporters who had moved from the area. We learned that the pool of individuals who care about the school is deeper than we knew, and we now have the opportunity to develop new, and reinvigorate dormant, relationships.
* ***Getting the word out****.* Like many other Jewish day schools, KBA has struggled to get the word out about the incredible education our students obtain. For far too long, we have been a “well-kept secret,” but by going virtual, we took significant steps to change that perception. Recognizing that many attendees would be new to our school, we created videos for the event that truly showcase what makes KBA so special – the advanced science curriculum, our one-of-a-kind JSTEM Lab (STEM thru a Jewish lens), immersive dual language environment, community service values, and of course, our faculty, students, and community of families.
* ***Bottom line****.* As you might imagine, expenses were less because there was no food, but not as much lower as you might expect because we took care to select a high quality, flexible platform that allowed for online donations. Although our total revenues were lower than last year’s biggest fundraiser ever (as expected), we beat our target by a wide margin, and our event solicitation that evening raised more than all previous live event solicitations!

To those of you who are considering replacing a live event with a virtual event, we happily share the important lessons we learned:

* ***Embrace change****.* Once we decided to go virtual, we examined every aspect of prior events through a “virtual lens” to determine what to keep from our traditional format and what to reimagine.
* ***Expand your audience****.*To encourage the broadest audience possible, we made the event free to attend, but with registration required ahead of time. Those who had already purchased tickets (at $180/ticket) were given the option of converting the ticket to a donation or getting a refund. Nearly all ticket holders converted to a donation. By requiring registration ahead of time, we expanded our database of potential supporters for future cultivation.
* ***Focus your message****.* We realized (or at least hoped) that the new format would expose KBA to many who did not know us at all, or knew us only in the past when the school was a quite different place.  We knew we wanted attendees to learn about the strong Jewish and secular education our students receive, feel the impact of our community programs, and experience firsthand the accomplishments of our graduates.

The videos that were created not only did a great job of showcasing these elements of our program, but will live on as recruitment tools on our website and as part of our welcoming information packet for families considering sending their children to KBA.

* ***Build excitement****.* Prior to the event, we planted a giant lawn sign at the home of each attendee identifying them as a “KBA Honoree 2020.”  The signs were eye catching, and helped to create much local buzz about the event. We delivered a beautifully wrapped bottle of kosher wine to each of our major donors (regardless of where they lived), with a hang tag suggesting they use the wine to toast KBA when they logged into the event. We also asked people to send in photos of the last time they dressed up and created a wonderful 30 minute photo loop of attendees and their family and friends. This was used to entertain people “in the waiting room” who clicked in prior to the official start of the event.
* ***Be engaging****.*To heighten interest and length of stay, we decided to shorten the event to one hour. We used the services of a professional emcee to keep the pace lively, and interspersed the evening with live and pre-recorded speeches, videos, and performances by the students, all of which were professionally prepared for maximum impact.
* ***Strike while the iron is hot****.*Although the bulk of our dinner-related fundraising has always taken place beforehand via the creation of sponsorships and an ad journal, we wanted to give attendees the opportunity to make a donation to KBA during the event. We made sure to use a platform that accepted credit cards, so that all funds raised that evening were collected. We also encouraged interest by offering three incredible raffle prizes for donations of $180, with multiples of $180 giving the donor multiple chances to win. The raffles were only open to those who donated that evening, and the winners were announced by the emcee live, at the end of the evening.
* ***Prepare for glitches****.*We worried about so many technical things – would a summer storm knock out the power or the Internet? What if registrants had difficulty logging in?  What if the live emcee had a connectivity issue?
To smooth the login process, we let registrants know a week ahead of the event when to expect their ticket and what to do if it didn’t arrive as expected. We prayed for good weather (that worked fortunately), and pre-recorded all of the emcee’s “live” segments in case a failure necessitated a changeover from live to pre-recorded. That did happen, but because we had a back-up plan, the glitch (emcee speaking but no sound) lasted for fewer than ten seconds.

The feedback we’ve received on the event has been incredibly positive.  Attendees liked being able to watch from the comfort of their own homes, in casual clothes, with the cuisine of their choice. Many told us they had no idea of the scope of KBA’s programs and student accomplishments, especially as the school pivoted to distance learning. We emerged from this event tired, elated, and ready to continue our efforts on behalf of our #KBAmazing school!

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