

# How to plan an event for professional advisors

Professional advisors are a critical audience for your foundation or fund. They have profound influence over the direction of gifts made in your community. Planning quality events for them can make a huge difference in your endowment building.

A memorable and successful event is one that:

- Is well planned and organized,
- Is appropriate for your community's professional advisors,
- Fits the capacity of your community foundation or fund, and
- Is worthwhile for the all participants (both those attending and those organizing the event).

Your events for professional advisors can be very simple. A typical agenda for a first event might include a lunch featuring a brief presentation about your community foundation or fund, specific information from a knowledgeable professional advisor, a question and answer session and handout material. You can build on this through other events and one-on-one meetings.

Many professional advisors must complete continuing education to maintain their licensure or certifications. Offering CEU's (Continuing Education Units) may boost attendance.

Offering food is another good way to build attendance. Breakfast meetings, starting at about 7:30 a.m., can be very effective. Provide a continental breakfast and a short program, and the attendees can be at their desks no later than 9 a.m. Lunch meetings can also be effective if you keep the program short and get people back to their offices quickly.

The program itself can be simple. Start with someone who can offer current information on estate planning or changes in tax law. This presentation should take no more 30 minutes. After 10 or so minutes for questions and answers, make a short (15-minute) presentation about your community foundation or fund. After a few more questions and answers everyone is off to start or resume their work day. Once you get to know your audience, you can think about whether to build more elaborate agendas or host longer programs.

Plan on holding events for professional advisors at least once a year. This lets you give an update on the work of your community foundation or fund (number of grants awarded, number of expectancies, asset size) while a professional advisor can give a presentation on whatever tax or financial information is currently in the news. Events are less labor intensive after the first time you hold one, since you will have a plan, an itemized to-do list, and ideas for improving it already in place.

**Seek help.** You don't have to go it alone. Request help from your board members and from planned giving experts at other institutions, such as your local hospital or college. These institutions might even be willing to cosponsor the event with you. *Ask them!*

**Decide on your purpose.** Think about what you want to accomplish and set a theme for the event. Do you need to introduce your community foundation or fund? Is it time to introduce professionals to ways they can partner with you for the benefit of their clients? Is there some change in the tax codes that affects their clients?

**Pick your audience.** Decide whether this will be a mixed professional group or an event for a specific type of professional. Professional advisors will include estate and tax attorneys, general practice attorneys (especially in rural areas), CPAs, certified financial planners, private bankers and trust officers, insurance agents, investment brokers, and in some rural places even pastors or funeral home directors. There is no one right way to do this. Don't be afraid to single out the group with whom you have the most connections to start. There will be plenty of opportunities to work with the other professional groups later. Don't forget to invite your board. Consider inviting high-wealth donors. They are often interested in planned gifts and tax strategies, and their advisors may be more likely to attend if a client indicates an interest.

**Plan a program.** Assign a master of ceremonies. Make sure your agenda includes introductions, and a brief presentation about the community foundation or fund and its importance to the professional advisor. Decide whether you will provide continuing education units, and if so, for which profession or professions.

**Set a date and time.** Select a date that will encourage participation and does not conflict with other community or professional events. Avoid scheduling your event at the same time the local bar association meets, during tax season, and at other times your audience has known conflicts.

**Select a place.** Base the location on the kind of event you plan and what you think will ensure the maximum participation of your invitees. Locations might include a community center with a meeting room, a nice restaurant or supper club, a college or university meeting room, a country club, or even a board member's home or office. If a meal is involved, work with the appropriate person to decide on a menu and to learn when you must provide a definite head count of those attending.

**Costs.** Be sure to think through your budget and whether to charge for the event. Sometimes charging a small fee will increase attendance because people will view it as more valuable. It may cost you something to have CEUs certified by a local college. Do you want to pass this cost on? Do you want to charge a nominal fee to cover materials? If cost is an issue, consider seeking a sponsor to support the event.

**Invitation.** Design a “save the date” card with time, place, and purpose of your event. Follow up with a letter of invitation. Find a professional advisor (perhaps a board member) to co-sign the letter with your board chair. Be sure to emphasize how your community foundation or fund can help advisors provide service to their clients. If CEUs are available, be sure to highlight the fact. Do ask for an RSVP. Make sure you include a telephone number or email address for responses. Check for local associations in your area and ask if you can include information about your event in any professional advisor newsletter.

**Mail the invitations.** Give people enough time to plan to attend, but not so much time that they set the invitation aside and forget about it. Generally this is about two weeks prior to an event, but may vary from community to community. Mail the invitation to the professional advisor’s place of business, not to the home address. A ‘save the date’ card, followed by an invitation letter, followed by a reminder postcard or telephone call helps to ensure attendance.

**Follow up on the invitation.** The personal touch is important for the professional advisor event. Consider adding brief handwritten notes on invitations and making follow-up phone calls to encourage attendance. A friendly personal connection—whether from a board member or a fellow professional advisor who is already involved with the foundation—can make all the difference.

**Display your materials.** Have a table with your community foundation or fund material attractively displayed and cards available so that attendees can sign up for more information. You can include samples of your legal documents, investment policies, and language to include in a will and so on. You may want to make a specific folder for professional advisors that includes this information, along with basic information about your community endowment.

**Follow up on the event.** Make a phone call or send a note thanking your attendees. Ask them if they found it useful, how you can improve your next event, and topics they would like to hear about in the future. This will help you both cement your relationships and build better events.