

Come closer: The 'Rock for Teens' fundraiser (top) is 'up-close and personal' while raising millions for cancer-stricken teens, notes Joann Roth-Oseary of producer Someone's in the Kitchen. Below, the legendary Roger Daltrey rocks the crowd.

COVER STORY

FUNDRAISERS FIND THEIR FOOTING

The improving economy is taking some of the pressure off planners to cut costs, but clients still demand bang for their budget bucks.

By Lisa Hurley

The brightening economic outlook has brightened the mood of some of her gala clients, says Joann Roth-Oseary, head of Tarzana, Calif.-based Someone's in the Kitchen.

"The improving economy is showing in not so much crying and wringing and wrenching about the budgets in general, and a greater acceptance of what things cost," she says, with fewer demands to just "make it cheaper!"

Roth-Oseary's clients are giving her somewhat bigger budgets to work with, but "they still need to see the bang for the buck," she notes. Specifically, she has put money back into lighting at some of her galas, an area that had been cut back during the worst of the recession. "Now we can put some

money into that, which is a lot of bang," she notes.

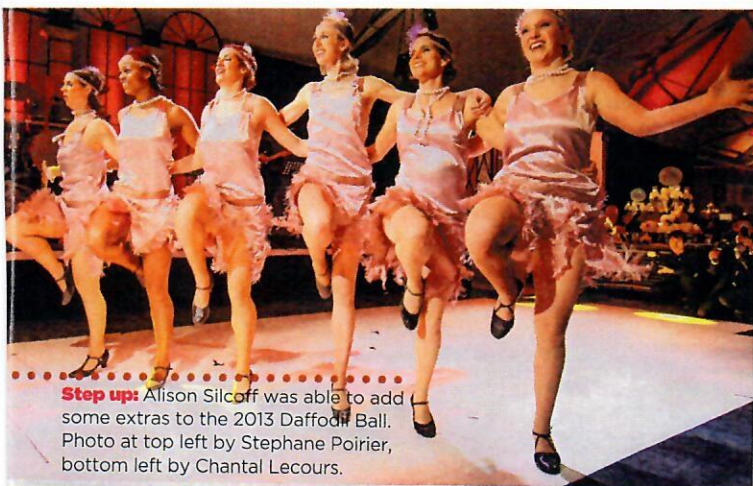
Alison Silcoff, head of Montreal-based Alison Silcoff Events, has "definitely" seen a rebound in the success of her signature fundraiser, the Daffodil Ball, which benefits the Canadian Cancer Society.

"The 2013 Daffodil Ball net revenue was a massive 23 percent up on 2012, compared with an increase of 16 percent in 2012 and a decrease of 3 percent in 2011," she explains. In contrast, net revenue at the 2009 ball was less than half that of 2008, she says. Also, this year's Daffodil Ball was sold out with 700 guests and a waiting list—"the first time this has happened since the recession," she notes.

BUDGETS DON'T BUDGE

Despite the strong performances of the most recent Daffodil Balls, Silcoff and her team haven't had significantly bigger budgets to work with. "Part of the reason for this is that it is not clear until very close to the





Step up: Alison Silcoff was able to add some extras to the 2013 Daffodil Ball. Photo at top left by Stephane Poirier, bottom left by Chantal Lecours.



Spend here, cut there: Ann Marie Arzt, who oversees the Rita Hayworth gala, notes that budgets are bigger in some areas but not others. Photos at top and bottom right by Bill Richert.



event—about four to six weeks prior—that revenue is going to be significantly increased, so commitments for entertainers, decor, etc., have already been made,” she explains. “But it does allow for small, last-minute enhancements.” For example, at this year’s “Great Gatsby” themed event, Silcoff was able to add some extra decor in the cocktail area, and to buy 1920s-style headpieces for registration staff and dancers.

In some good news, gala clients of Shelly Tolo, head of Seattle-based Tolo Events, didn’t cut their budgets during the downturn.

“They had the opinion, ‘We’re asking our guests to pay the same amount for their tickets; we want them to still receive the same type of experience,’” Tolo says. “That being said, if we were able to find a savings for the budget without having a negative or noticeable impact for the guest, we looked for it.”

Tolo did see attendance dip a bit at some of her clients’ galas, “but they still raised the same amount or more,” she says. “Having less people at your event isn’t a bad thing if the people who are in attendance are the right people.”

WAITING GAME

David Merrell, head of Los Angeles-based AOO Events, cautions that it may be some time before gala committees truly boost budgets.

“Because of the economy, we have been forced to find a ‘wow’ factor even with smaller and more conservative budgets,” Merrell says. “I just don’t think the benefit of these loosened purse strings is going to be noticeable for a couple of years.”

“It’s a blessing that the events are coming back,” he says, “but it doesn’t mean they are going to

come back in a big way!”

Ann Marie Arzt, president of Chicago-based Eventscape, agrees.

“Corporations that stopped providing sponsorship dollars are now active in the gala market again, so overall attendance and revenues are up,” she says. “However, the downturn that occurred beginning in 2008 caused most nonprofits to immediately tighten their belts and reduce their overall spending on their events. These tightened budgets are still in place in most cases, despite the revenue growth.”

Arzt notes a “spend here, cut there” dynamic at work.

“Galas are returning to hiring large orchestras again as well as supplementary entertainment—i.e., for receptions, etc.,” she explains. “I do think that the cutbacks made a few years back in decor have not fully returned yet and most are getting by with less. Food costs



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To your health: Two gala fundraisers from Tolo Events that benefit health causes: the Group Health Gala (top) and EvergreenHealth Gala (bottom). Photos by Phototainment.



have increased, so a larger percent-
age of the budget is being spent on
food and beverage. Many non-
profits have also cut back on print-
ing elaborate gala invitations or
have taken a serious look at the
validity of their mailing lists.
Others are now putting their pro-
gram books online."

FAVORITE FUNDRAISERS

Many of the event planners inter-
viewed have a special fondness for
certain the fundraisers they have
produced.

Roth-Oseary calls two of her
longtime galas her "standouts."

The gala for the American
Friends of the Hebrew University
funds scholarships that "truly do
benefit all mankind," she says.
And at the "Rock for Teens" event,
which benefits a teen cancer cen-
ter at UCLA, "We bring down the
house and raise multimillions for
the kids. It's up-close and personal
and an amazing evening."

While asking her which of her
galas are her favorites "is like ask-
ing a parent who their favorite
child is," Tolo points with pride to
several of hers.

At the 2008 EvergreenHealth
gala, "the guests raised enough to
fund the mobile mammography
unit for the East Side of Seattle,"
Tolo says. "That's cool—producing
an event where we have a direct
impact on women's health in
Seattle."

And she loved the 2009 Group
Health Gala. "The theme was
'Moulin Rouge,'" she recalls. "We
showed the 'Tango de Roxanne'
scene from the movie on the big
screens while dancers performed
the exact choreography on the
dance floor. I got teary-eyed during
rehearsals for that one!" ●

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