



DoveLewis Wet Nose Soiree Goes Online

DoveLewis is the only nonprofit, 24-hour emergency & ICU animal hospital in Portland, OR. Established in 1973, we provide care to sick and injured animals from all over the Pacific Northwest. We are a hub for specialized care. A nonprofit haven for animals in need. A member of Oregon's community. A resource for veterinarians worldwide. Our mission is to care for every animal and every person who cares for them. Always.



DoveLewis[®]
Veterinary Emergency & Specialty Hospital

Challenge

This year we planned our annual gala for April 17, 2020. However, in mid-March Oregon's governor restricted events to 250 people for four weeks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though our event fell just outside the orders, we were concerned our attendees wouldn't buy tickets to a large event because of the uncertainty of the situation. In addition, we were up against the 30-day cancellation deadline for many of our service contracts. So we made the shift to go virtual.

We contracted with a videographer to create two videos: an introduction to DoveLewis and a special appeal. Our in-house audio-visual team put together the welcome message from the Board, the Development Director and our CEO. They highlighted our auction items and created instructional videos for the event.

HIGHLIGHTS

DoveLewis saw a surge of new followers as a result of holding their gala online.

Ticket holders found it easy to convert their payment to a straight donation.

Small group Zoom cocktail meetings allowed supporters to still have a "table" at the event.

An online campaign encouraged supporters to pre-bid for auction items.

We created social media posts about the upcoming event on Facebook, etc. To generate more traffic, we encouraged our audience to post pictures of their “event experience” on social media. Our live gala is a unique event where people get to interact with lots of cute animals. To echo this experience, we included animal photos in our posts and stories whenever we could. In all our communications, we directed people to the auction website.

Many of our donors are older and we were concerned they might not attend an event that involved unfamiliar technology. We were also worried that the current economic situation would affect giving. So, we made the virtual event free to attend, casting a wide net and making the call to all of our donors and the greater community. As a result, we discovered that 25% of our audience for this event was brand new to us. We also saw an increase in staff participation, including staff reaching out to their own networks for support. This was huge!

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DoveLewis

Solution

It was a tight turnaround to convert our gala to a virtual event. It took a week to decide what virtual meant to us, a week to plan, and a week to implement. We intended to launch the event on YouTube with a pre-recorded video at 7 pm on Monday and hold the auction open for 5 days. However, the file was so big it would have taken 7 hours to post to YouTube. So we uploaded the video to our website instead and still managed to go live just after 7pm.

We already had our sponsors in place and had sold half our tickets. Moving the event to digital meant changing how we recognized our sponsors. We included sponsor call outs in all our digital marketing, emails, and social media, as well as in our videos. We also created individual call outs on Facebook. As a result, the majority of our sponsors stayed with us.

We told our ticket buyers we would refund their money if they requested it, but we encouraged them to donate the money to the organization instead. Most chose to donate the money.

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Before the event, we held an online campaign to encourage people to pre-bid for items. We also held small group Zoom cocktail gatherings. One donor invited the 20 people he would normally bring to the live event. The Development Director joined the call to talk about the auction items and thanked everybody for their support.

Results

With the new online environment, our live auction items did fall a little short of previous years. However, our silent auction was super successful, with many items selling for 150% of value. Overall, our net revenue was only down by 8% because we were so successful in reducing our expenses, so we felt really happy with the results.

Normally our live event attracts about 400 people. This year 360 people registered, 25% of whom were new to us. We saw a surge in followers and a huge increase in impressions from our social media efforts.

Now we are looking at next year and considering how we can take elements of this digital experience and translate it into the live experience.

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Tips from DoveLewis

- With a live in-person experience, you have a formula. A digital event will change a lot more than you realize.
- Be forgiving of yourself and your team as you work through issues.
- Stay agile and adapt to the rapidly changing situation. It might be a little bumpy but it's worth it.