

▶ WINE, WOMEN & SHOES

Imagine you're at a fancy ladies' soiree, enjoying wine, food, shopping and wearing your most glamorous shoes, while learning about the people you'll help each time you open your wallet. You're immersed in an atmosphere of fun, fashion and compassion. Welcome to the world of Wine Women & Shoes (WW&S), and a new kind of fundraising event. (Gentlemen are welcome, too, of course.)

Elaine Honig, president of STUDIO 4Forty and founder of WW&S, developed her new format for fundraising events in 2006. Her idea was to spare nonprofits and supporters the grind of annual events designed to wring money out of supporters by creating fundraising events so packed with excitement and ways to give that people would want to participate, even if they didn't know about the charity involved. Such events would be more about marketing—cultivating and creating a community of prospective donors who would feel so good about their experience that they would return year after year. "That means getting them on the mailing list, familiarizing them with the charity, exposing them to the mission, motivating them to want to help," she says. "Then they become personally involved in the story and mission of the charity."

As producers of fundraisers, Honig and her staff have the long-term cultivation of donors in mind while being diligent about the task at hand. "We make sure we don't leave any stones unturned in terms of revenue gathering," she says. "We're always asking ourselves, 'Are we pulling every lever we can to raise money?'"



The origin of an idea

The idea behind the organization began with targeting women and pairing wine with something besides food. "I was on the board of a women's organization in Napa," says Honig, "and we had the usual, 'Okay, we've gotta raise some money, and there are so many wine-tastings in Napa—what do we do?'" No one was doing a wine tasting targeted exclusively to women, she says, when she had the idea to pair wine and shoes. That was the beginning of Wine, Women & Shoes. So we could say, 'This Sauvignon Blanc is like silver strappy sandals, in that it's racy, and goes with a wide variety of foods, and the heel is like the backbone of acidity' and so on. We would use that as a teaching tool."

They hosted their first event in Napa, and among the guests were a handful of people who lived part-time elsewhere. They sought Honig out and said, "This was so much fun. Can we do it in Dallas, Sarasota, or Boston?" That was the beginning of Wine Women & Shoes.



A new business concept

WW& S is essentially a licensing organization with a highly sophisticated brand and program they customize for their clients. "We don't actually underwrite or put the event on," says Honig. "The charity licenses the concept from us and they pay us a licensing fee. For that, they get the rights to the city and the territory, all the intellectual property, an elaborate, on-line textbook guide, and the benefit of our full-time employees who serve as consultants with the charity. They also get project managers who help organize the event and put it together. Our graphic designers work with them. We provide wine people who procure all wine donations." On the local level, the client is responsible for building, staffing and underwriting the event. "They pay us a flat fee, and everything they earn, they keep," she says. Honig keeps a sharp eye on the money. "We know, going in, what the client's revenue goal is and how much they need to make to have this [event] make sense," she says. "Say they need to make \$140,000 net to make it worth their while. We know how to work to that. If someone's down on sponsorship, can we bring in another \$10,000 on the cash calls or the live auction. We're constantly watching the numbers. We can also add a handful of other revenue generators around to enhance that."



How it works

When you arrive, you're greeted with a glass of wine or Champagne and welcomed by handsome, charming hosts, known as Shoe Guys, who are circulating about the event, carrying shoes or jewelry on pillows or silver platters, selling raffle tickets, and making sure women are enjoying themselves and learning about the mission. You move through a gauntlet of paparazzi, who are photographing guests looking glamorous in the shoes they've saved to wear for this

occasion. Then you can browse the marketplace where from six to 10 vendors of fashionable goods will donate 20 percent of that day's sales to the charity. "Women don't tend to buy shoes at the event," says Honig. "They generally buy their shoes before the event, or pull out their super chic pair they rarely get to wear." For those who wear their own sexy stilettos or fabulous flats to the party, there are the "Best in Shoe" awards and an opportunity to show them off at the fashion show. "The women brave enough to wear those shoes are not shy," Honig laughs. "They get up on the stage and strut around and have a ball." The atmosphere is incredibly positive, she says. "It's like [playing] grown-up dress-up. Having permission to have silly fun."

Making it happen

The key to making all this work is having a great team. "I feel incredibly blessed to have this wonderful team that moves mountains for our clients," says Honig. "I get emails from clients saying things like, 'If Heather hadn't gotten up and done the cash call, we wouldn't have made that extra \$40,000. Our team just blows me away on a regular basis,'" she says. "That's key for us." WW&S has a small core staff in the Napa Valley, a graphic designer in Boise, another in Ukiah and project managers in Georgia, Nashville and Bakersfield.

"Wine Women & Shoes continues to push the envelope," says Bakersfield-based, Heather Frank, director of project management and events, who works closely with Honig on each project. "Elaine and I are Yin and Yang," she laughs. "Elaine's all business, and I'm all nonprofit. Project management constantly focuses on the charities, how to get a better experience." She is fanatical about customer service. "We are there to make sure we give the client everything they need to make the event look beautiful, to be talked about a week later and to raise as much money as possible.

The give

WW&S gives its clients multiple outlets for the give, and a range of prices for donors of all levels.

"Everyone has a place where they're the most comfortable in giving," says Frank. "There are some people who may say, 'I just want to give some money and know where it goes.' That's the typical cash call donor. Doesn't want to shop, doesn't really want to buy the raffles, but will raise the paddle at \$5,000 for the cash call. We have other people who really want to get something out of it. Those are the live auction donors. Then, we have some who are unable to give in high amounts or increments. Those are our donors who like the marketplace or the 'Wall of Wine' or the winner-takes-all 'Key to the Closet' raffle. Our team at WW&S has mastered the art of giving and giving our audiences multiple ways to support," she says. "It's a day of fashion and compassion."

It's impossible to mention the WW&S brand without calling attention to their "look," which, thanks to the elegant graphic design lead by Boise-based Sarah Obialero is feminine, fun and truly fashionable. Part of its client package is a customized graphic identity for their partners, which makes them look distinctive and always at the level of excellence necessary to be a WW&S brand. "We offer the graphics as a service to our partners," says Obialero. "We work with each client individually to customize their branding and provide them with a look that will fit their local audience and showcase their event in the best light. It also helps us maintain consistency for our brand on a nation level," she adds. "We strive to ensure, through the graphics and project management that each event is a success and it all comes down to collaborating together with one goal in mind—to raise as much money as possible for their cause."

"Our brand is constantly trying to get better," says Frank. "When we partner with a company, it's important for them to realize we're not looking out for our own best interests, we're looking out for theirs."

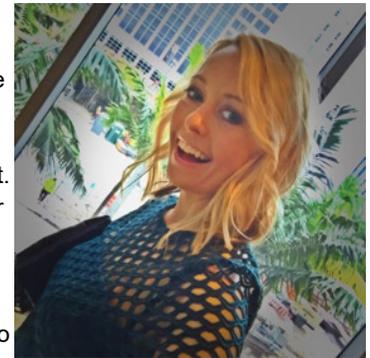
Putting on a WW&S event takes energy, creativity, teamwork, dedication and expertise. Not everyone is right for a WW&S event. Frank always encourages a conversation with the prospective client before they approach an agreement, so they can understand what it takes on both parts to pull the event off successfully. "It's really just making sure we're setting that team up for success," says Frank. "We're not about the sale, we're about finding long-term partners."

A client joins the team

One long-term partner was so impressed with what WW&S did for her nonprofit that she recently joined the team as a project manager.

As development director of the YWCA in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, their women-focused fundraiser would bring in about \$30,000. But when they saw what WW&S was doing, they realized there was potential for a much higher level and they signed up. The results were gratifying. "In our fifth year with Wine Women & Shoes, our net revenue had grown to \$256,000," she recalls. That money keeps open the YWCA's domestic violence shelter.

She was impressed from the start that the WW&S model offers multiple revenue streams. "In Nashville, we try to tie each of the event activities to a very specific value that the gift adds to our organization," she says. For example, if a guest makes a \$50 donation in the form of a chance for the "Key to the Closet" prize, it's motivating—not just because you want to be part of the fun, but because you know your \$50 raffle ticket will provide an emergency cab ride for a woman and her children to the charity's domestic violence shelter. It makes you want to give, and this is true at any level. You really want to raise your paddle when you know that your \$5,000 response to the cash call will provide a summer program for kids who will be staying in the shelter. "Millennials like to see how their money is going to be applied," says Meier. "When you tie each piece to the mission, people fall in love with more than the event, but what that organization is doing."



Meier says she fell in love with the concept itself and was excited to become part of the WW&S organization and to work with the team to create these programs with multiple communities. "WW&S is so unique," she says. "It offers an array of options and is catering to a new crowd of donors. It's exciting to meet the development directors and help them raise the money they need to fund their mission at incredible organizations all over the country."

"We see consistent growth," says Frank. "Our growth averages between 15 and 30 percent a year. We achieve this by continuing to add new activations, continuing to focus on our best practices and continuing to be consistent with our approach and activation."

Helping others

"What I like about this particular business and being an entrepreneur is that it grows as I grow," says Honig. "In the early days, it was just me, a wine person and a graphic designer and then we had to add some more people, because we couldn't do it all ourselves. So now, I've gone from being someone who was doing the project to someone who is managing the people who are doing the projects. I love it."

For Honig, the joy in helping others goes back to her childhood, when her mother told her that if she was feeling bad, to go out and help somebody else and she would feel better. To this day, she never forgets the advice. "Every day I pay attention to how to be a better person; how to be a better leader; how to be more supportive and enthusiastic for my team. It's a daily practice for me that I appreciate and am grateful for." Much as she is the business mind behind WW&S, she claims not to be a numbers person at heart, but she honors practicality. "I don't love looking at numbers, but I know that I need to pay the team. If I'm going to run things properly, I need to have the revenue to do that. So it matters that I look at the numbers. And it matters if we're managing expenses properly. It's a practice. It allows me to do something, and get better at it and pay attention and grow as a person, and I like that a lot."

The future

Since launching, WW&S has exploded across North America in the last decade, producing more than 350 fashion events that have net \$50 million for the organization's nonprofit partners.

"I've always liked contributing in whatever way I can," says Honig. "I like creating these events because it's a way of helping people raise money. Every cause matters."

As for the future, Studio 4Forty continues to grow and expand. Since the format is working so well, and WW&S can have only one partner in a given territory, Honig and her team have devised another event format, Farm to Table(aux). This is a food and art-themed fundraising concept developed as a separate and non-competitive licensed event to WW&S, which is characterized by the same kind of energy, creativity and fundraising expertise that make WW&S events so special.

The event combines the farm-to-table culinary concept with a contemporary interpretation of the French Tableau Vivant, or "living picture." At each event, local chefs and farmers prepare a culinary feast alongside costumed actors, models, or dancers who perform in mini-vignettes on small stages. They launched their first FTT in Bakersfield in October 2016, have another planned for 2017 and a number already being scheduled for 2018.

For Honig and the women behind STUDIO 4Forty (which includes one gentleman), helping others continues to fuel their passion as they blaze new trails in fundraising, while wearing fabulous shoes.

