

Challenges of Organizing an Event in the Muslim Communities

Consider the following scenario:

You are the lead organizer for a fundraiser for an Islamic organization. Your organization and its mission are well respected within the local communities, and you have procured a well-known speaker as an icing for the event as well. The banquet hall – located in convenient proximity to most of your targeted audience - requires a minimum number of guaranteed dinner orders. Based on your recent history and informal indications from friends and families, your team agrees to place a minimum of 350 order and pay for it in advance. The online registration page has only one registrant; your supporters tell you that they have “sold” over 300 tickets, but only 50 have actually paid. Exactly a minute before the official start time, the online registration page lights up when one more person registers!

Now, pause for a moment and put yourself in the shoes of such (volunteer) organizers: You are at the event, the doors are about to open and you have no idea – whatsoever – as to how many will actually show up. In the above scenario, over 500 guests showed up at the door, including the 50 who had paid in advance.

While some may think of the unexpected guests as a good problem to have, it makes a mockery of all the planning. In the opposite scenario - when the number of actual guests is less than the guaranteed tickets - a fundraiser ends up becoming a fund drainer ! In an extreme instance, just last year, strong verbal assurances of almost 150 people yielded less than 10 actually showing up.

One may find this scenario amusing, unless they are at the organizing end of things. It would be amusing if it were not the fact that this situation is repeated within the Muslim communities in the US, and surprisingly, at our successful, thriving organizations!, As such, my intended audience for this article is our communities, who may not be aware of the dilemmas faced by our volunteer organizers and the effort they put in again and again. To be fair, the organizers are appreciative of our supporters who respond in time, participate, and contribute. The simple idea here is how we could be even more effective if our communities become more efficient in their responses.

Ticket Printing Expenses, Online Registrations, and Organizers' Expectations:

From an organizer's perspective, I don't know why we continue to spend time and money on printing tickets. A better option is to print postcard size flyer with all the pertinent information. The idea of not printing tickets may take some time for the most obstinate ones to absorb, but we need to strive for it. The problem is often incorrectly attributed to our elders. I differ vociferously as I see the issue just as prevalent among other age demographics. It's not a matter of being comfortable with the technology, but rather a mindset and a social norm. A sheer lack of waiting till the proverbial and actual last minute has to go away. We need to cultivate a social norm whereby this practice is not acceptable anymore.

In a similar vein, we use the word “sold” when all we have done is that we gave someone a ticket for which they have “promised” to pay at the door, or in some fortunate cases, pay before the event. This kind of confusion and the resulting uncertainty are easily eliminated if we use online registrations.

Most of our organizations are volunteer-run and as such, have limited resources of both time and money. Online registrations allow us to plan confidently, and eliminate the inordinate amount of hours and resources. All we ask of you is to register 3-4 weeks before a major event, and 1-2 weeks before a non-annual event.

A true impact of such lack of positive planning is not obvious unless we look at a financial analysis of such events. One of the factors of a successful event is how little the food waste was, and also how efficiently volunteers/organizers' time was utilized. Were they assured and composed on the day of the event, or were they scrambling to cover for the unexpected attendance whether too high or too low? Unlike established organizations in this country, our organizations have neither the statistical wherewithal to accurately predict attendance, nor endure waste of our already limited resources.

These issues may seem mundane but reflect poorly on our community, and pains the organizers to no end. It's no surprise then that we often experience volunteer burn-out in our already thin ranks.

Lastly, events without a ticket or admissions price are just as important for our invitees to respond, which in some cases, is a matter of clicking on a Google sign-up list.

Adhering to the above-mentioned norms will contribute immensely to our volunteers' sanity and emotional stamina.

K. Rizwan Kadir, an MBA alumnus of the University of Chicago, is Chairman of the MCC Full Time School (Morton Grove, IL.), and a Director of the Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA).