

**So you're considering participating in AACTFest 17 but the expense is an obstacle? Take heart! Many other companies have creatively raised the money to be a part of this networking and skill building event, and they are sharing their ideas with you.**

*(Excerpts from How They Raised The Cash and Hit The Road to AACTFest by Liz Lydic and Gil Savage)*

Theatre companies participating in AACTFest, whether at the state, regional or national level, find it an exhilarating, fascinating, and a unique experience. It's also a challenging one.

Most of the challenges are artistic (selecting the right production, for example) and logistical (transporting people, sets and costumes). However, financing festival participation may call on unfamiliar knowledge and skills.

The good news is that many theatres—even those with little festival experience—have developed successful fundraising techniques geared toward travel and other expenses associated with AACTFest.

### **Start with a Plan**

Planning for AACTFest is the first important step toward reaching your fundraising goals. The further you progress in an AACTFest cycle (from local to state, from regional to national), the more expenses you need to cover.

In all cases, the common success factor is good planning for both travel expenses and logistics. For starters, producing a traveling show with a small cast and simple set makes transportation easier and less expensive. (The cost of multiple rental vehicles to transport your set to various locations in the U.S. can mount up quickly.) But there are no rules here. There have been many fine productions that have moved on to the National level with few set pieces and three actors or less. Equally fine productions with elaborate sets and large casts have gone the same route, thanks to determination and sufficient funding. In either case, focus on how you can put forth the highest quality production with the resources you know you can muster.

Once you have done your production planning, setting a specific financial goal is a next critical step. Do your homework to understand each of these costs in detail for the state, regional and national AACTFests:

- Creating your production, licensing, sets, effects, etc.
- Getting the set, cast and crew to the festival—and back.
- Festival participation costs
- Food and lodging expenses

#### Funding Sources

Many theatres report funding opportunities with foundations, arts councils, and civic clubs. If there is no grant to apply for, sometimes a phone call or personal appeal to one of the aforementioned entities will produce a contribution—typically after you’ve moved up a level of the festival cycle. For example, one company that made a call to a community foundation received a \$5,000 donation. In addition, AACT’s Endowment Fund provides grants to theatre companies representing their regions, specifically to help offset travel expenses to the national festival.

It’s rare to find 100% of your funding in such sources, however. They’re really about closing the gaps in your fundraising, and in getting you started toward success.

Here a few examples of other companies’ fundraising strategies:

#### **Written “Asks”**

- “One successful letter writing campaign to our patrons offered them a way to take some ownership in their community theatre being in the national spotlight.”
- “The fundraising committee wrote a donation solicitation letter and shared it with company members. They were then asked to share it via email with friends, family and colleagues. The letter also was sent to our mailing list, and shared on Facebook and other social media sites.”

- “Our president sent a personal letter to our theatre patrons, asking them to consider donating. We received several large donations and lots of small ones.”

### **Community Engagement**

- “We solicited support from our donors with a ‘buy-a-mile’ campaign.”
- “We had a graph on our website showing the fundraising progress.”
- “We made a stage plea for support from our patrons, with the cast and crew holding buckets at the door.”
- “Before the performance, announce a challenge to the audience, like ‘We need to raise \$X at today's performance to pay for our traveling expenses to X Festival.’”
- “Ask a local business to help underwrite a specific cost, like shipping the set, travel, etc.”
- “We had a giant poster in our lobby, reading ‘Help Us Get to the Nationals’ along with a fundraising ‘thermometer’ that we colored in red as the funds increased. That was a fun way for everyone to see our progress and we felt it inspired patrons to help.”
- “The local newspaper gave us good coverage for winning at State and Regional levels and publicized our fundraising performances.”  
Use the Show Itself

One popular fundraising method is to perform special benefit performances in various community venues or in your own space. (It's also great practice for setting up and striking your set.)

- “We did a dinner prior to [a performance of the AACTFest show] to raise money. The dinner was about an hour, and then an hour for the show, so it was a short evening. We did really well with that—had the food donated, and everyone loved it.”
- “I heard recently of a snazzy dinner hosted in a patron’s home. Folks paid \$50 bucks for dinner and some time with the theatre group traveling to the festival.”
- “Each year we have a performance of the production before the Southeastern Theatre Conference Festival, usually including food and drink. This year we brought in some Lone Star beer from Texas for fun, had BBQ and other Texas fare to go along with the Lone Star feel.”
- “We asked for donations at a ‘pre-travel’ performance of our show, soliciting donations from our theater family to help defray costs.”
- “We held two fundraising performances—one for the regional festival and one for the national. Admission was a donation of \$5 or more, and most people gave at least \$10—and in some cases considerably more. In fact, we received a number of \$100 donations and a few that were greater than that.”
- “We did a series of public performances in different places, each with a “freewill” donation.
- “Put on additional performances at donated venues, and offer a talkback about the festival process and an opportunity to meet the cast.”

- “We produced a separate show for school audiences. The schools loved it and the income from those showings funded state travel expenses.”

#### Getting Together

- “We partnered with the other winning company from our state, and performed both our shows for one weekend in our theatre. It was unique entertainment for our patrons, and the two companies split the proceeds. That put us over our goal.”
- “Our local regional theatre invited us to perform in their much larger space.”
- “Our theater and one across town were both invited to the state festival. We sold sponsorships for a joint T-Shirt, then sold the T-Shirts.”

### **Tried and True Strategies**

#### Top Tips

- “We did a couple of fundraisers at local eateries, which donated 10% or 20% of sales when a special coupon was presented.”
- “At a regularly scheduled performance, we sold tickets for our nationals fundraising performance, and held a 50/50 raffle. We actually received more in direct donations for nationals at that production than we received from the 50/50 raffle” [where 50% of the total money collected is randomly awarded to one of the donors and the other 50% goes to the festival fundraising.]
- “We utilized Facebook to get the word out about our success and our fundraising needs. We also talked about winning at regionals and going to nationals in our newsletter.”

- Murder mystery dinners at a restaurant with a private room.
- Kickstarter [“the world's largest funding platform for creative projects”].
- Amazon Smile [“automatically donates 0.5% of your purchases to the charity you select”]
- Benefit/Cabaret performances
- Raffles at performances.
- “We asked members of the company traveling to nationals to commit to do their best to fundraise \$1000 each. Where one member fell a little short, another would exceed the \$1000, thus filling the gap.”
- “Have each cast and crew member pledge to help raise a specific amount of money— for example, to cover the cost of individual travel or plane fare.”
- “I can’t emphasize enough to avoid bake sales, car washes, etc. Instead, work smarter on one or two major events.”
- “We solicited donations at every performance in our theater during the curtain speech.”
- “Produce a show that you know will make money specifically to fund travel to AACT-Fest. A financially successful production of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat gave us the economic liberty to finally commit to taking the plunge.”
- “Going online to gofundme.com was enormously useful for tracking who donated and how much, and also made the ‘thank-you’ process much easier to manage. Having a good email campaign message that our friends and fans could forward or post directly to their social media was a great tool.”
- “The single most critical piece [for an online campaign] was a Paypal ‘Donate Now’

button. The ability to donate immediately by simply clicking the button, instead of sending in a check brought results: More than 70% of our donations came in via PayPal.“

- 

“I emphasize that we have award-winning community theatre right here in our community. People like to support a person or organization they consider as a winner.”

“It was obvious when we met our goal (and then some) that the relationships we had cultivated over 32 years with our patrons, the business community and school systems, were key to our success. We invited all donors to one of our musicals and treated them to a dessert reception. The cast/crew and board of directors were all on hand to personally thank donors for their support.”

As these tips and success stories prove, there are many ways to fund your AACTFest adventure. In fact, most theatres use several different methods. Take a little inspiration from these folks and let their ideas and techniques help you take your show on the road. In the words of The Burlington (MA) Players' Rachel Fennell, “I would strongly encourage any group to go for it. The generosity of your community will amaze and humble you.”