

Mangia! Mangia! How to Host a Profitable Pasta Dinner Fundraiser!

Pasta dinners are an easy-to-organize fundraiser involving every member of your team. They can be a wonderful teambuilding exercise. Here are some tips to make it easier. Thanks go out to Jason Hartmann, Rick Tyler, and Jack and Kathie Kentfield for their suggestions.

Choose a date

- Check school calendars, holidays, major town events, other organizations' calendars when choosing your possible dates. You don't want it to conflict with another big event in town if possible.
- You can have continuous serving from 5:30 to 7pm for example, but it requires that your wait staff be very attentive to cleaning up, etc. as people leave. OR you can sell X number of tickets to two settings - 5:30 and 6:30 - that way you can replace all the dirty stuff just once in between, before opening doors to the 6:30 reservations. It is also easier to cook for just two meals than for continuous seating.

Location

- Look for a place to donate space for it - churches or schools may allow you to use their kitchens and space for 10% of the proceeds or a donation. They may also allow you to advertise on their bulletin boards or in church bulletins, etc.
- You need a place that will be shoveled/plowed in the winter in case of snow that night, and adequate nighttime lighting and an easy-to-find location.

Advertise

- Sell tickets in advance. Keep track of how many adult, seniors and children's tickets you sell so you get an idea of headcounts to know how much food to buy. Encourage reservations (pay at the door but reserve tickets in advance) so it helps with headcounts. Offer take-out meals for seniors to bring home (which means getting containers to pack it all in)
- Have someone print tickets on their computer instead of having them printed - put Adult, Child, Senior on them and have your sellers circle which kind of ticket it is that they are selling. Use inexpensive business card stock to print them up on.
- Make posters and put them up all over town; advertise in the Fundraiser section of Chief Delphi and also on regional FIRST websites - area teams like to support each other... - if you go to their event, they will come to yours.
- If you have a local newspaper take a picture of your robot (maybe last year's) dressed in an apron and "serving up a plate of spaghetti" or with a chef's hat on and have them write up an article in advance of the dinner so townspeople know about the fundraiser. Newspapers need a lot of lead time so plan that early.

Organize Your Staff

- Break team into Setup crew - they come and set up tables, chairs, do kitchen prep work, get sauce, meat, etc. started. Serving crew - train them on how to be waiters/waitresses – most people don't have a clue how to do that. Have Cleanup crew. That way all the team members can pick a time to work that is convenient for them. Put someone at door to take tickets or to sell tickets. Have someone escort people to empty tables. Have team photographer record the event.
- No one likes to go to a restaurant where you can see the wait staff standing around talking together. The team shouldn't be, either. They should be waiting on people, talking about FIRST, schmoozing! It's hard for them to do this but this is how you will attract more attention and more possible sponsors.
- Team gets to eat AFTER the dinner has ended and before you do cleanup. Don't forget to save some food for the team.

The Food

- Solicit food or paper good donations from area groceries, Italian restaurants (sauce), bread stores, grocery stores. Have team members bring a dessert to share; put variety of desserts already cut up on trays so wait staff can bring around to table for people to choose. You'll probably want to serve salad, pasta, sauce, a meat (meatballs or sausage), bread, butter, dessert, drinks.
- Contact your local health inspector to determine local regulations. You will probably need to use food handling gloves - NOT LATEX - and check regulations for cleaning dishes (disposable may be an easier alternative). Check to see if your local health inspector must come by to inspect before you can serve your meal. You may need to provide a list of food preparation workers. You might have to use purchased ice, salad greens, etc. You might also have to show proof of temperature of hot items and cold items.
- Serve family-style. You waste less.
- Keep some pasta out plain for kids who don't want sauce on it
- Offer coffee, decaf coffee, tea, water, kool-aid (and have some milk on hand for the little ones). Sugar, fake sugar, creamers. People like lots to drink so wait staff must be attentive to that.
- Start big coffee pots EARLY, they take longer than you think to heat up. Check them frequently to be sure you haven't tripped a circuit breaker while multiple ones are brewing (it's happened to us before!!!). If you are tripping breakers consider using a heavy gauge extension cord and running a pot in a different room.

The Ambiance

- Bring robot there for demos; have info about your team and FIRST on-hand
- Prepare a video presentation of pictures taken during your Build season – most people are not aware of what goes into building the robot. Keep volume turned off or very low.
- Team wears team t-shirts, of course!
- Your library might have some Italian music you can play softly in the background or maybe some "dinner music" - it's mostly an adult crowd that you will attract and they want something unobtrusive playing in the background.
- Plastic rolls of tablecloth can be purchased - red and white invokes an Italian dinner feel.
- Cheap centerpieces - go to local crafts store - watch for these to go on sale - pick up "ivy bowls" - they are like little fishbowls. Put colored pasta in bottom. Put little tea candles inside. They are pretty and inexpensive and can be re-used.
- Some teams solicit prizes from area businesses and sell raffle tickets (but some states require a permit). They make extra money this way.