

Steps for CancerSupport: Fundraising and awareness building in a hybrid environment

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Abstract text: Many cancer support NGOs rely on fundraising events and individual donations as a major source of funds. Popular fundraisers include sponsored competitions, teambuilding challenges or cultural events, all of which severely compromised by the COVID pandemic. This was the case for ESCA CancerSupport (ESCA CS), a Geneva-based organization providing emotional and physical support in English to people affected by cancer. In previous years, a large part of tESCA CS' funds came from one large event: an annual dragon boat event that attracted at best over 50 corporate and open teams in the competition, with over 3,000 people in attendance. This event brought in over CHF100,000 annually, a significant part of the organization's budget.

With the 2020 dragon boat event cancelled due to COVID, ESCA CS had to quickly react to fill the potential funding gap. The organization wanted to maintain corporate and individual engagement, continue to raise awareness, and bring in the needed funds, all while operating under COVID restrictions.

Steps for CancerSupport (Steps for CS) was first run as a 20-day fundraising and fitness challenge in 2020, and has since taken place annually, with the latest edition running in March-April 2022. It gathers corporate teams, open teams and individuals to compete in the number of steps taken and in fundraising. Funds are brought in initially through registrations: corporate and open teams of 10 participants pay CHF1,000 and CHF 250 respectively, and individual competitors pay CHF 30. Donations are accepted during the challenge, many of which come from donors sponsoring a particular team or individual. Steps are counted through the Pacer Health smartphone app, which allows teams and individuals to track their daily ranking and overall totals. The app also works as a communication platform, with ESCA CS able to share messages about its services, set short-term challenges, and encourage people to donate, whilst participants connect by sharing photos and messages.

In its first year, with 370 participants, Steps for CS brought in nearly CHF80,000 through registrations and donations, which increased to over CHF107,000 in 2021 with 875 participants. The cost of organizing the event included paying for the app and hiring an event coordinator, who managed a team of volunteers covering the rest of the tasks such as tech support, outreach, registration, and donation tracking. In 2022, the numbers of teams and participants registered grew again, with nearly 1,000 people signing up.

Steps for CancerSupport challenge: Stats 2020-21

	2020	2021
 STEPS TAKEN	76 million	1.26 billion
 MONEY RAISED	CHF 78,500	CHF 107,000
 PARTICIPANTS	370	875
 CORPORATE TEAMS	4	21
 COST TO ESCA CS	CHF 3,423	CHF 6,035
 VOLUNTEER HOURS	500+	600+

Steps for CS has been a great success. Its hybrid model enables online community engagement through physical activity. As COVID restrictions ease, more in-person group walks can be organised while keeping the competition virtual. It has increased awareness of the work of ESCA CS, brought in significant funds and united participants from around the world. This model could be replicated by other organizations with a lot of space for flexibility and innovation.

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