

16 Tips and Tricks for Fundraising Auction Chairmen

Congratulations on being the auction chairman, staff member, or key volunteer of the upcoming fundraising auction gala for your school or not for profit organization. The purpose of these auction tips and tricks is to help make your task much more successful, easier, and less stressful. My number one goal after every auction I conduct is to have the auction chairman return home, happy but exhausted, crawl into bed, smile and think "I just hosted a great event."

Being an auction chairman is never easy, simple, or automatic. However, if you team up early with a quality fundraising auctioneer/consultant your task will be much less daunting and much more successful. All auction galas are unique, but they also share similar characteristics. Talk to your auctioneer/consultant to steer you on the right path for your group.

1. **Incoming Auction Chair:** An often overlooked, but extremely important detail of annual fundraising galas is to make certain your auction chairman for next year serves on this year's auction steering committee and auction committee. This will make the next year's event so much easier for them as will learn firsthand the nuances and larger issues of putting on this particular fundraising event.
2. **Steering Committee:** "Too many cooks spoil the broth" and too many committee members decrease the efficiency of meetings. Have a small steering committee of 3-5 key members organize the details of the auction, themes, decorations, hiring of your Auctioneer, and venue details. Assign the task of item procurement and ticket sales to the much larger auction committee.
3. **Outside Supporters:** Look for ways to encourage people who are outside of the organization members to want to attend your event. If only the parents of the school attend, you are pulling money from your primary funding source. Conversely make certain your board, vendors, and supporters are all in attendance with plans to visibly support the cause. Attendees are more likely give when they see the cause being supported by those close to the organization.
4. **Fun and Fresh** are the buzz words for fundraising events. Your event must be both fun and fresh if you want to increase revenues and hopefully set new records for fundraising in this economy. You have a better chance of getting people to attend your event if you are being creative in your approach to make the event fun to attend. The same tried and true methods used year after year are now tired and blue. People like to have fun and feel good about helping your charity continue the good work. Set up your event to add the elements to achieve this goal without losing your focus on fundraising.
5. **Date selection:** To insure success, be sure to research the date for your event. Competing with other similar causes/events will result in both organizations suffering due to split attendance. Many metropolitan areas have a social registry or event calendar that will clue you in on when other galas and events are scheduled.

In the fall, don't forget about football schedules. If a portion of your attendees are season ticket holders, do not expect them to miss the home game in favor of attending your event. If the event is televised you may need to provide access to a TV during the silent auction.

Many auction chairmen feel that they must have their event on a Saturday night. Not true at all. Auctions have been successfully done on all nights of the week. Just use caution on when the event ends. During the week the fundraising should be complete by 9:30 p.m. and on Friday and Saturday nights 10:00 p.m. One issue of Saturday nights – for people that have worked all week – is by then, instead of being fired up and ready to celebrate, they find themselves wanting to stay home and rest. Sunday afternoons can be a great time for auctions. These events tend to be more relaxed. They also start and end much earlier, for example 3:00 to 7:00 and prices for venues can be much lower than the Friday/Saturday rate.

Schools: Fall is typically your best time for a fundraising event for a variety of reasons. The parents of this year's graduating class are going to be much more eager to support the school as their student has a full school year to attend and will benefit from the profits of the auction. If the event is held in April, these supporters are likely going to be focused on the next school their children will be attending. Furthermore, in the fall everyone is fired up about the return to school, new clothes, new school year, new level of classes, etc. In the spring.....reality is setting in, students, teachers, and parents are tired, and everyone is simply looking forward to summer vacation. While I have conducted many successful school events in the spring semester, given the choice, I will always select fall for school auctions.

6. **Quiet please:** NO! Many auctioneers or volunteers at fundraising events are constantly requesting the crowd to be quiet. This is the wrong approach as no one wants to be "shushed". Let the attendees have fun and create a party atmosphere! A good benefit auctioneer, provided you have paired them with an auction quality sound system, will have the entire crowd involved in the auction. You want the attendees cheering on the bids and celebrating the "wins" when the gavel drops and the auctioneer shouts "sold!" The reality is, during most live auctions, only 20% of the crowd actually bid. But everyone should participate – and by doing so – helps to create an exciting atmosphere. A good benefit auctioneer realizes this and becomes the ringmaster of fun by encouraging everyone's participation.
7. **Item procurement (7-11):** This may sound too simple to be true but "gather items that your attendees will want to purchase." The items that will sell the best are trips/experience/items that are not generally available to the general public. Create auction packages from items that go together and then sell that package as one item. Example: Round trip airfare (request friends donate frequent flyer miles to the organization) to a ski house (donated by another friend of the organization) in Colorado. Rental car for the week (a friend donates American Express miles to pay for vehicle) with three dinners

during the week at nice restaurants (traded to a charity in the area for three dinners in your area where you have three dinners donated for use in their auction) ski and boot rentals for a week (traded to you for jet ski rentals or a guided fishing in your area that has been donated to your organization). This is a simple example of how several individuals, who thought they had nothing to donate, come together to create an exciting package.

If you live in a beach area, a week at a beachfront condo is not that big of a deal to your attendees. If you live in a ski area, having access to a ski house is not a big deal. But if you live in a cold climate – and get to purchase a week get away to a warm climate – it is a big deal and vice versa. You simply have to find that long distance trade partner.

8. **Build auction packages** with your auction committee. Members often think the only place to solicit auction items is from retail vendors. The members complain “I don’t know anyone who has anything worthy to donate to make the auction exciting.” I have helped numerous committees by first suggesting what types of items/trips/experiences they may have interest in purchasing, and build that package with the help of committee members and the people they know. It is amazing how many contacts a 20-person committee actually has. Start off by asking the question, “Does anyone know someone that has a contact that has (fill in the blank) ?” This type of brainstorming will create auction packages that are fun and fresh and raise significant amounts for your charity. Consignment is not a bad word, ask for suggestions on quality consignment companies.
9. **Airfare not needed!** Sometimes it is much easier, especially for families, to simply do a stay-cation. In Florida, the same resorts that are booked during tourist season will welcome the opportunity to offer lodging during the off-season. (i.e. summer months.) A weeklong stay-cation where parents can still easily stay in touch with work, but the kids can play all day, can be a great family vacation. Mom and Dad are happy and the kids make lifetime memories of their great beach vacation. Never underestimate how much fun playing in the water, sand, and sun can be for children.
10. **Consignment packages:** Often auction committee do not have the time or resources to put together packages of great trips or experiences. Plus, if these items must be purchased in advance, there is a risk factor the price generated may be less than cost invested. Consignment companies such as Winspire, purchase components of great trips and experiences at wholesale prices. These components are blended together to form great packages which can be sold at your event with no risk. If the package doesn’t sell, there is no cost to the charity. The charity only pays if the package is sold successful and payment is not due until after your fundraising event. Most importantly, a quality consignment company like Winspire provide concierge services for every they provide. The process is the auctioneer sells the package, the charity collects the money, says thank you, and provides winning bidder contact

information to the consignment company. The consignment company takes over and works with the winning bidders to schedule the experience.

Few things are more frustrating than to have a great group of motivated people in attendance at your fundraising event, but the auction packages up for sale are less than desirable. Auction attendees are strategic in their bidding. If they do not like the auction item, they will not bid, regardless of their wealth. This is one way of how “money is left on the table”.

- 11. Audience Development:** Jesse James always robbed banks. Why? Because this is where the money was located. Solicit people to attend your event that appreciate your cause, enjoy supporting worthy causes, and have the financial capacity to be a bidder. If the people who attend your auction feel they have done their part by purchasing a ticket to the event, the auction will not be successful. Every community has generous people that enjoy giving to good causes so long as they feel their money is making a difference in the lives of other people. These are the people you want to attend your auction.

In an effort to communicate with your donors be sure to send out periodic e-mails that highlight exactly how your charity is using the funds they helped to generate. In today’s economy, everyone wants to get the maximum “bang for their bucks.” For most people, if they witness their money being spent, in what they perceive is a worthwhile and frugal manner they are more likely to donate next year.

- 12. When to start planning for next year’s Gala:** Start planning for next year’s event while you are working on this year’s event. Audience development, item procurement and venue reservation should always be top of mind. Most organizations only have one event per year. When possible, planning for a fundraising gala should start 15 months prior to the event itself. In other words, for a period of three months, the planning for this year’s event and next year’s event will overlap. This will allow you to secure the venue before most people start booking, save-the-date notices can be published in this year’s catalog; donors/item procurement can be solicited much earlier and during the excitement of this year’s event. Any tweaking for next year’s event can take place immediately after this year’s event which will reduce everyone’s stress level as memory of issues tend to fade.

- 13. Timeline:** Develop an auction planning timeline and stick to it! When realistic deadlines are met, stress levels on all volunteers and staff are greatly reduced. Imagine your reduced stress level will be if all your auction items have been procured 30 days before the event? (You may be thinking Scott this is

not realistic. I ask “are you sure”?) Every auction chairman has awakened in the middle of the night with the question “Did we do _____”? Keeping to the timeline creates more sleep-filled nights.

For detailed information on fundraising event timelines listen to the 3 webinars on “auction timeline components” presented by Winspire and Scott Robertson Auctioneers. These webinars go in depth on the specific planning needed for Silent Auctions, Live Auctions, and Special Appeal aka Fund A Need.

Additionally, the timeline for the night of the event is equally as important! Establish a timeline and stick to it. Often times the person in charge of the silent auction begins to panic due to a perceived lack of activity in the silent auction. They rush up with 30 minutes remaining in the first scheduled silent auction closing - requesting that I extend the bidding deadline until there are more bids. This is a three-fold mistake. 1) The entire auction timeline will be postponed which throws off everything including the Chef’s timeline. 2) People will bid when they know there is a deadline. 3) The bidders that followed the rules will be disappointed/angry when they realize the rules have changed in the middle of the event. Savvy bidders know the timeframe for the silent auction and plan accordingly. Additionally, many folks are simply having fun with their friends and wait for the last possible minute to place their bids. If you have good items, the proper number of items, and your benefit auctioneer is communicating the timeline to the attendees....everything will work out fine. Don’t fall into the postponing trap.....it just wastes precious time and delays all aspects of the event. Remember “never allow the tail to wag the dog”. What I mean is the silent auction may be a lower percentage of the money raised at the event, it just typically is scheduled first. Use caution this fundraising component of the fundraising evening does not interfere with the success if the other fundraising components such as the live auction and special appeal aka fund-a-need.

- 14. Volunteer Burnout:** An unpleasant thing for everyone involved is volunteer burnout. This usually occurs when one person is given a task they don’t like, are not good at, feel underappreciated, or simply do not understand what they are expected to do. (Sound familiar?) Every volunteer needs a job description with specific tasks and specific timeline/due dates. The key to success is communication. If volunteers know their responsibilities and guidelines they are much more likely to perform the assigned task(s). By observing auction volunteers who appear to be burned out, I often question if they were actually ignited from the start. Make sure to say thank you and help them to realize how important their contribution is to the success of the event.
- 15. How much should we charge for tickets?** Some charities feel they should give tickets away in the hope people will attend and then spend money. This is typically a mistake. Charge at least enough for the

tickets to cover all expenses plus some for the charity. Remember, the reason for the event is to raise money so your organization can continue its good work.

16. **Three Questions:** At the end of the event if you can answer “YES” to the following three questions..... you hosted a successful event.

1. Did the event start on time and stay on the timeline?
2. Did your attendees have a good time?
3. Was registration and check out easy?

To streamline the checkout process, I suggest utilizing benefit auction checkout software. There are many good programs available on the market.

Hopefully these 16 tips and tricks gave you a few “Ah ha, I never considered that” moments. Please understand that conducting and consulting for fundraising auction galas is my full time profession. As a veteran of 23 years and hundreds of fundraising galas, I am at the top of the game and yet learn new concepts and strategies with each auction I conduct

Each year Sara Rose Bytnar and I select approximately 70 fundraising auctions to work with as their consultants/auctioneers. If you feel we may be able to help take your fundraising event to the next level, please reach out to us. As I often say, I can generally tell within a five-minute phone conversation if I am potentially a good fit for your event.

We are passionate about assisting charities to raise money for their worthy cause. Please email me at **Scott@thevoe.com** if you wish to set up a no obligation appointment or wish to start receiving additional information about our favorite topic, fundraising auctions.