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The charity auctioneer is key to a successful benefit

As presented by Dennis Caldirola of Benefit Auction Associates

(Editor's note: In mid-January, Dennis Caldirola was the featured Wednesday Club speaker on the topic of "The Benefit Auction from Both Sides of the Mike." This is a major excerpt of information from that presentation.)

The charity benefit auction is the single most successful vehicle for nonprofits to raise money. Washington State has become the epicenter of benefit auctions since the idea originated here decades ago. Today, many of the 9,000-plus Washington charities choose the auction route, creating intense competition for donor dollars. The choice of an auctioneer has never been more important to the success of your fundraising event.

A benefit auction consists of four primary elements: the auctioneer, the date, the venue and the auction items. Of these four, the auctioneer is the most critical to success because the auctioneer can and should be an integral part of the planning process. Given this pivotal importance, auction committees need to select and engage an auctioneer as soon as possible. A lead time of eight to ten months before the event is reasonable. An auctioneer can make the staging of a benefit auction much smoother, assure a good experience for your guests, and raise the most amount of money for your cause.

How do you choose an auctioneer for your group? It is best to focus your research within our regional pool of professional charity auctioneers. Because the charity auction has its roots in the Northwest, many of the national practitioners are based in this area.

Begin the auctioneer selection process with referrals and check web sites to see who has worked auctions for nonprofits of a size similar to yours. Conduct interviews, and when you are near to deciding on a final candidate, ask if you can observe them at work. Usually another nonprofit will gladly grant permission for your observers to attend their

event for several minutes for this purpose. Observers should dress appropriately and remain discretely at the back of the room. Once signed on, you should expect that the auctioneer will schedule a number of planning meetings with your committee.

Setting the date is the next major challenge. There are two auction 'seasons' in the Northwest – late winter/spring and fall. Because of this, it is the utmost importance to choose and secure a venue early, but not before checking the local events calendars for competing auctions or other upcoming arts presentations, musical performances, major league sports, etc. You might consider the alternatives of holding your event on a Thursday or Sunday – many more venues are available and the auctioneer's fees are generally less at these times.

From the very beginning, a professional charity auctioneer can work with your events committee to create an effective guest list by evaluating:

- Who cares the most about the nonprofit's mission or cause?
- How many of these people are willing to attend or invite others?
- Who, in the community, is positively affected by your organization?
- What businesses supply you?

The auctioneer can help you decide which subcommittees are needed and what needs to be done, and by when. And to get things off on the right foot, a good auctioneer will have lists of vendors and specialists that can furnish what you will need, from sound and lighting equipment to auction software.

The auctioneer can help your procurement committee to target the most desirable and salable auction items, as well as to help set the asking price for them. As a rule of thumb, auction bidders prefer packages offering experiences, as opposed to physical items, and if the experience packages are closer to home and can involve family members, so much the better.

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A sustaining resource for the not-for-profit community

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The charity auctioneer... (continued from page 1)

A partial list of 'tried and true' auction items include:

- Weekend/dinner packages to the San Juan Islands, Whistler, or Vancouver B.C.
- Hotel/theatre/dinner/limo packages
- Auto detailing for a year
- Parking for a year
- Event tickets
- Private, in-home dinner with a chef for eight to ten guests
- An "instant wine cellar," provided by Board members
- A theme party in your home
- Spa packages
- A Lake Chelan family-get away

A professional charity auctioneer will develop the overall evening program based upon the chosen theme, the expected guest list and the nature of the hosting organization. Program elements may include silent auctions, a raffle, the live auction, a Fund-an-Item, a dessert dash, a 'feeding frenzy,' or purchase of the centerpiece.

A critical element that is often overlooked by auction committees is the designation of a 'stage manager' for the night of the benefit. This person, who is someone other than the auction chair, has the evening schedule on a clipboard and is stationed very near the auctioneer to assure that people are where they should be and that the events of the evening occur on time. This will range from the dinner courses being served at the correct intervals, to ensuring that the correct live auction items appear on stage. Renting several radio headsets for the stage manager and key auction crew members is a good investment for medium to large sized events.

The choice of auctioneer for your fund raising event can have a great affect on the amount of stress you and your committee members experience, and most importantly on the total receipts for the evening. You should be able to rely on your auctioneer to help with the program design, as well as create the pacing of the evening and to present your cause in an appealing manner. The true skill of a charity auctioneer is to deliver an enjoyable evening, while presenting your guests with many engaging opportunities to open their wallets and contribute to your cause. •••

About the Presenter

Dennis Caldirola began his career as an auctioneer over ten years ago for Kip Toner Benefit Auctions, the largest charity and benefit auction house in the Pacific Northwest.



Dennis Caldirola

During that time, both as a KTBA auctioneer and as an independent contractor, he has called auctions for the American Red Cross of Santa Monica, Habitat for Humanity, the Heart Association, the NW Kidney Foundation, LATCH, WACAP, and numerous elementary schools, high schools, churches and synagogues. He has also been the emcee / announcer for dozens of benefits and charity events throughout the Seattle area including the PONCHO Art Auction, the March of Dimes, the Pilchuck Glass School, the Sierra Club and the Seafair Torchlight Parade.

Dennis may be contacted at dennis@festaseattle.com.



Financial Statements for Nonprofit Board Members

Date: March 19, 2008

Time: 11:55 AM - 1:30 PM

Fee: \$35

Presenter: Leah Kosik, CPA, Jacobson Jarvis Special Projects Manager

A major responsibility of board members is to maintain financial accountability for their organization. As stewards of their nonprofit, they are ultimately responsible for ensuring that the organization is fiscally sound and has sufficient resources to successfully operate its programs. Attendees will gain a greater understanding of the basic financial statements that monitor fiscal direction and the basic purpose and structure of internal controls needed to ensure reliable financial reporting.

This presentation will be at a basics level for those with little prior experience reading financial statements.

Wednesday Club is held in the Plaza 600 Building at 600 Stewart Street (at 6th Avenue) in Seattle. The \$35 program includes materials and a gourmet box lunch. Attendees receive 1.5 units of CPE credit.

For information on registering online, or by mail, go to: http://www.jjco.com/edu_wedclub.html.