



Beating the Bottleneck: Doing Auction Checkout Right



I was recently asked to describe my best and worst experiences in running auctions. The worst experience came to mind immediately! It was about 14 year ago--the first time I helped out with my church auction--and it was the bottleneck created by our checkout process. We hadn't automated anything at that point. Members wrote their bids on the silent auction bid sheets, and a volunteer recorded the winners for the live auction. After bidding was over, the item numbers and names were written at the top of 3-part NCR forms. Each individual item had its own form—so if there were 10 places at a dinner, there were 10 forms for that donation. The winning bidder was recorded on the form, then the forms were sorted by bidder number so that you had a stack of forms for each bidder. These were added using a hand calculator. By the time we were ready to take payments, two hours had passed! I'm surprised anyone even came to the auction the next year...

Not surprisingly, the best auction experience was the year that I felt I had completely figured out the checkout process! This time, when the auction was over, the receipts were ready immediately. Within about 20 minutes, checkout for a 350-item auction was over and we were vacuuming the floor!

So...how can you turn a bad checkout experience into the best-case scenario? As with everything pertaining to auctions, it comes down to planning and organization. Here's a blueprint:

Auction Data:

Use an **auction database** that records information on all items, donors and bidders, and has the ability to track sales. This can be a program developed in-house or one of the many good systems available on the market. Of course, I'm prejudiced toward my own system, [EasyAuction™](#) which is very simple to use and produces a very efficient checkout experience.

Volunteers:

Plan to have sufficient **volunteers** for all necessary tasks:

- **Bidder Data Entry:** You'll need a couple of people to check in walk-in bidders and hand out bidder numbers to those who have pre-registered. You can either complete a handwritten form to gather walk-in contact information or use a laptop to enter it directly into your database. In any case, ALL bidder names and numbers should be entered into the database before sales data entry begins.
- **Sales Data Entry:** You will need TWO people for each data entry station—one to read aloud the winning bidders and one to enter the data. This two-person-team method cuts data entry time in half and also improves accuracy. So, if you have two data entry stations, you will need four people—two to read and two to type.
- **Cashiers:** Try to have no more than 30-40 bidders per cashier. So if 100 bidders attend the auction, you might want three cashiers. If you will accept credit cards, you might want to have a separate credit card station, as this type of payment can take a little longer to process.
- **Item Pick Up:** Assign a few people to gather up all tangible items, including gift cards and certificates, in a central location so that winning bidders can pick them up after they pay their bill. If possible, label items with their catalog number so that they can be arranged in order; this will save a lot of time!

Timing

Communicate with other auction planners so that the **timing** of the auction is beneficial for producing receipts as quickly as possible:

- **Multiple Auction Closings:** Do you have a lot of auction items—i.e. more than 100? If so, consider structuring several auction closings. For example, let's say you want to end bidding for the silent portion of the auction at 8:00. Designate half the items to close at 7:45. Mark the bid sheets (use stick-on dots to mark the early closers) so that bidders know which items will close early. At 7:45, half of the bid sheets go to data entry; at 8:00 the rest are submitted. You've given your data entry people 15 minutes extra to get their job done.
- **Oral Versus Silent:** Are you having an oral/live auction? Be sure to close the silent auction before the start of the oral auction. Since it takes longer to bid on oral auction items (hopefully you have an entertaining auctioneer!), the data entry people can catch up and have all the sales entered long before the oral auction is finished.
- **No Oral?** If you're not having an oral auction, present music, dessert, or some other compelling entertainment while sales data entry is taking place. In most cases, if you can entertain bidders for a half hour, you should be able to have data entered and receipts printed before the stampede to leave begins.

Hardware

Make sure you have sufficient equipment for all your needs:

- **Computers/Laptops:** Hopefully, you have an auction database that allows multiple users (like [EasyAuction](#)). If so, try to have at least one laptop for each 100 auction items for sales data entry. You might want another laptop for the check-in desk, and perhaps another to record oral auction sales. When calculating how many laptops you need, keep in mind that as soon as sales data entry starts, those computers cannot be used for anything else!
- **Printers:** Beg, borrow or buy the fastest printer you can find! If your auction venue has a copier, check whether it can be used as a printer—many modern ones can. Alternatively, try and find a member with a high-speed laser or inkjet printer you can borrow. Be sure all printer drivers have been installed ahead of time—test it!
- **Credit Card Reader:** Consider buying or renting a card reader to speed up the process of accepting credit cards. (If you're using an iPad or IBook, check out the [Square](#) application which has no setup fee, gives you a free card reader, and only charges 2.75% on purchases.)

Hopefully, following some or all of these suggestions will turn your problem checkout into a smooth running machine!