Putting the "Community" in Community Auctions: Data Systems

A "community building" goal for your auction can affect how you run your auction in many ways. Although it might seem like a pretty dry subject, a well-thought out way of handling information can make a huge difference in the success of your auction. To be a truly community-building event, your auction should have a data system that keeps in mind the needs of attendees, donors and volunteers alike.

Let's look at the effect on your community of NOT having a data system.

- *By being less than efficient, your volunteers will struggle to keep track of donors, donated items and attendees/bidders. It will be easy to overload certain volunteers, while others may be underutilized.*
- *Creating the catalog, bid sheets, etc. can be a nightmare if the information has to be retyped or copied and pasted for each type of document needed.*
- *Auction night checkout can be a bottleneck for winning bidders and volunteer cashiers alike without an effective system. This can reduce attendance at the next auction.*
- *Thanking your donors will be difficult if you don't keep track of donated items and sales efficiently. Unappreciated donors will hesitate to donate again next year.*

Conclusion: Make life easy for your volunteers; make the event a seamlessly pleasant experience for attendees. Use a data system!

DATA SYSTEMS

So, what kind of data system do you need? There are a lot of sources; the one you choose will depend on the size of your auction, the expertise of your volunteers and your budget. There are two main types for you to consider: volunteer created systems (using either spreadsheet or relational database software) and professionally developed solutions.

Volunteer-Created Systems

The two main software programs volunteers use to create data systems are spreadsheet programs (like Microsoft Excel) and relational database programs (like Microsoft Access). Both programs allow you to create tables with rows and columns and can be used to keep track of data. Columns will have a heading designating the type of information stored in it; each row will contain information for one person or item.

However, although Excel has a lot of features making data sorting and filtering easy, it is not as easy to get the data back out in a useful format. Excel can be used as a Microsoft Word Mail Merge source to create forms for bidding, a catalog, etc. However, if you choose to print bidding increments on your bid sheets, process sales easily and produce receipts, etc., you will either need someone who can write programming code or look at a relational database solution.

Relational databases, such as Microsoft Access, use the same table format as spreadsheet applications, but allow for links between the tables so that complex forms and reports can be created. Although they are certainly more difficult to learn than spreadsheet applications, they may not beyond the reach of talented volunteers. (Parenthetically, I should note that the prototype for my auction software, **EasyAuction™**, was created using Microsoft Access, and that program served my church and a number of nonprofits well for a number of years.)

An easy way to understand the difference is to look at the Item Sales Data Entry form and a report, Receipts. Both rely on connections between three data tables: Bidder, Sales and Item.
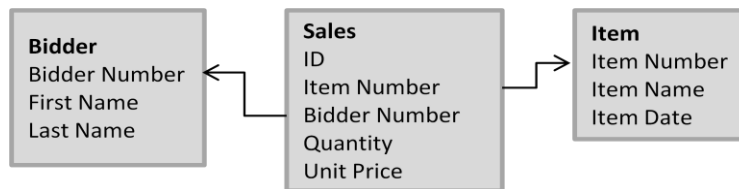
Both the Sales Data Entry Form and the Receipts report require information about the bidder, who purchased the item, the item, and the sale itself. Because the Sales data table contains references to the bidder (through the Bidder Number field) and the item (through the Item Number field), information from all three tables is available when you configure the receipt report.

The Item Sales Data Entry form uses the table structure shown above. Because of the links between the tables, all the fields from all the tables can be used in the form.

In this form, Choose Catalog # and the item Name are from the Item table; Bidder Nbr and bidder Name are from the Bidder table; Qty and Sale Price will be entered in the Sales table through this form. It's a simple form to use: the data entry volunteer types the item number, the bidder number, quantity purchased and unit price, then

moves on to the next item. Most professional auction systems use almost the same type of form; there are only so many ways you can enter sales data!

After sales have been entered, you will print receipts. The Receipt report is constructed using the same table structure as the Item Sales Data Entry form:

Auction Receipt

Tuesday, May 24, 2011

Bidder Number: 7   Art Aspinall & Sara Mellen

Item #	Item Description	Item Date	Sale Price	Qty	Line Total
721	Snowshoe Trip	2/27/2011	$10.00	1	$10.00
705	Bouldering in Morrison		$10.00	1	$10.00
1030	Little BIG Lebowski Fest	1/15/2011	$20.00	1	$20.00
1030	Little BIG Lebowski Fest	1/15/2011	$22.00	1	$22.00
1214	Classical Music Is For Everyone!	1/30/2011	$10.00	1	$10.00
1008	Calendar Girls Party and Photo Shoot	11/20/2010	$80.00	1	$80.00
1029	JUC Calendar Girls Calendar		$25.00	1	$25.00
1029	JUC Calendar Girls Calendar		$28.00	1	$28.00
5000	Special Appeal		$50.00	1	$50.00
Total Amount Due:					**$255.00**

In the Receipt, Item #, Item Description and Item Date are from the Item table; Bidder Number and the bidder's name are from the Bidder table; and Sale Price and Qty are from the Sales table.

This points to one of the most significant and time-saving aspects of having a data system: Once the data is entered, you can produce an infinite number of useful reports from the data.

What is the downside of a volunteer-created system? Well, if the volunteer who created the system ever leaves, you may be up a creek unless they're good enough to create a system that won't break (I'm not that good, which is why I hired a programmer for **EasyAuction™**!). Plus, you usually have to count on the system evolving over time. Since you're creating it from scratch, you won't think of everything the first year; your efficiency may not be optimum for some time.

One more thing—if you are planning on paying a member or friend to develop a system for you, be sure to look at professionally-developed systems first. You may find it's much more cost-effective to purchase a system than take on the role of software developer yourself.

Professionally-Developed Database Systems:

There are many professional auction data systems available. I'm not going to list them here; a Google search will give you the results you want. However, I'll talk about the two main types, and then give you some advice on choosing a vendor.

Computer-Based Software:

This is software delivered either on a disk or via download. It is loaded onto your computer's hard drive, and all the information you enter will be stored on your computer. Prices range from a few hundred dollars to thousand, depending what features you want and, often, on whether you want to network computers or not.

The main pro is that you own the software; you pay for it once, and can use it as long as you want, or until it become obsolete.

There are some significant cons: you will be asked (or required) to update the software periodically, and that can mean some hassle for you. If you change your operating system or computer, you may find you have to re-purchase a new version of the system as the old version may not work with your new operating system. Often there is a limited support time or pay-as-you-go technical support.

But the biggest con is that only one person can use the software at a time unless you get a network license, which can be quite costly and is often limited to only a couple of computers. Then, even if you do network, your volunteers will probably have to work at some central location. The result? A heavy workload on a couple of people rather than being able to spread it over a larger committee.

Web-Based Software

Web based software exists on the Internet. Data is stored on a secure computer called a server. You are given a secure login, as are your helpers, and you work entirely through an Internet connection. When it's time to print reports, you just print them as you would any other document or web page, from the Internet.

There are lots of pros to this method: In most cases, the software can be used by as many people as you like; anyone with an Internet connection and the proper password authorization can use it. Thus, no networking is necessary. In addition, when changes or enhancements are made to the software, there will be no annoying updates to download—they'll just be applied to the software real-time.

Prices vary widely, and are usually charged on a subscription basis (similar to Constant Contact, GoToMeeting, or other web-based applications). But prices vary widely. The best pricing systems have a base price, with additional charges for specific features. That way, you can pay for the features you want rather than paying a high price for components you don't need.

Web-based systems rely on a consistent, fast Internet connection. The days of dial-up are gone—but if that's all you have, or if your connection is not reliable, you should consider a computer-based system.

For both web- and computer-based software, be careful to look at more than the bottom line: what features are you buying? Are there advertised benefits that can only be accessed for a higher fee? What is the technical support scheme? Be sure to calculate the cost-effectiveness of each system you evaluate: figure out how much you plan to earn with your auction, and figure out the percentage the data system will cost. It may be worth from five to ten percent of your auction proceeds: a better experience for bidders, donors and volunteers will reap benefits now and in the future.

Of course, I hope you'll consider **EasyAuction™**! For those who read to the end of this article, I'll give you a 10% discount on the software—just email me with the words "Data System Article" in the subject line of the email to get a demo and claim your discount.