



Putting the “Community” in Community Auctions: Event Planning

A “community building” goal for your auction can affect how you run your auction in many ways. As you can imagine, how you plan the event itself can determine whether the auction helps promote the overall health of your community.

There are as many ways to plan your auction event than there are people with ideas! Successful auctions can exist alongside golf tournaments or softball games, sit-down dinners or buffets, cocktail parties or church socials. But whatever style of event you choose, there are some basic conventions that will make the auction more enjoyable and more successful on all levels.

Food

If you want bidders to be happy and stay a long time at your auction, you may want to feed them. There are a few ways you can do this, depending on the type of event you’re planning. The most important thing to keep in mind: dining should not interfere with the auction process. Here are some ideas:

Sit-down dinners, whether catered by the most elegant restaurant or served by school children, can be a great opportunity for your members to spend an evening getting to know each other. However, the food section of the evening should be separated from the auction. Don’t expect people to either stroll through the bidding tables with a large plate in their hands, or to jump up and bid between courses.

- Hold the silent auction before the dinner starts, perhaps during a preceding cocktail hour. Cut off bidding just as dinner is served.
- If you do decide to have all or part of the silent auction available during dinner, make sure that the bidding tables are located in the same room as the dinner.
- If you’re having an oral auction too, start it as dessert is served so that people are still engaged. Be sure each person has a large-numbered bid card to make it easier to determine the winning bidder.

Buffets can work well, but, again, timing can be tricky. You don’t want bidders to have to decide whether to bid or eat!

- You can choose to allow bidding during the buffet or close down the silent auction prior to opening the buffet. There are pluses and minuses with both approach:
 - If you allow bidding during the buffet, your food lines will be shorter, allowing people to eat more quickly and get back to bidding. However, slow eaters, or those who go back for more, might miss out of much of the auction.
 - If you close the auction prior to opening the buffet, it works more like a sit-down dinner. Do keep the line moving by having servers and by replenishing popular food items quickly.

- If you do run the dinner and auction at the same time, be sure to make auction-related announcements clearly in the buffet location.
- Buffets don't work well for oral auctions because they can be a distraction; if you're holding an oral auction, don't start until the buffet line has been closed and cleaned up.

Small plates dining, where substantial finger food is served in several locations throughout the auction venue, is a great option for auctions. Bidders can keep an eye on their favorite items without sacrificing their ability to eat.

- If you cater, you'll find that a small plates dinner is significantly less expensive than a full sit-down dinner. Choose a menu of finger food for maximum mobility.
- Self-catered dinners can be just as enjoyable:
 - Make sure food is plated attractively and arranged so that items of the same type are grouped together.
 - Consider asking for specific food donations that fit your needs. Again, finger food is a good option for auctions.
 - Serve different courses in different locations to encourage bidders to move throughout the auction items.

In all cases, plan your food with an eye to the needs and desires of your community.

- Do you have a number of vegetarians or vegans? If so, be sure you have plenty of options for them.
- Label food with the ingredients to avoid food allergy emergencies.
- Even if you plan on a "walk around and bid" dinner, be sure you have some tables and chairs set up for those who cannot maneuver between the auction items easily.
- Consider enlisting helpers to assist bidders with special needs. You don't want anyone to have difficulty managing a plate and a walker at the same time.

Alcoholic Beverages

Will you serve alcoholic beverages, like wine and beer? If your organization approves, this is a good option for making the event feel more festive. Some tips if you do serve alcohol:

- Keep it simple! Don't have so many choices that the beverage line gets too long. Remember: People standing in line aren't bidding. Beer and wine are generally all you need. If you want mixed drinks, consider hiring a professional bartender.
- If your auction layout includes more than one room, have a "bar" in each room. This will cut down on lines and general congestion.
- Check out your local laws about serving beverages. You may be able to get a temporary liquor license, or you may be able to accept general donations at the beverage table.
- Be sure to have a non-alcoholic alternative available, such as soda or sparkling cider. Coffee and tea is a must in many communities, so be sure to offer it if possible.

Entertainment

Music and other entertainment can add to the festive atmosphere of your auction event. But, as with food service, it's important for it not to interfere with the bidding process. Here are some suggestions:

- DO have music, but at a relatively low volume. Whether recorded or live, loud music eliminates one of the best things about a community auction: the ability of people to interact and have conversations.
- Don't have distracting performances during the silent auction for the same reason: you want people to bid, not sit down and watch a show.
- However, it's a great idea to have entertainment while invoices are being prepared. Close the auction, and then distract the bidders with a performance while sales data is being entered and bills are being printed. Consider including something interactive, like a dance contest.

Charging for the Auction

Should you charge admission to your auction event? The answer depends on a number of factors:

- Is the auction a part of a larger fundraising effort? If so, and if the fee itself is seen as a large part of the money being raised, you will have a higher per-person charge. However, if you are planning on raising most of the funds through the auction itself, be aware that a high admission fee can limit the amount of money the attendee will spend in the auction.
- Are you serving dinner? If so, it's perfectly reasonable to cover the cost of the dinner with an admission fee. If you charge about what it costs to provide food and drink, the bidder will see the cost as reasonable. For example, if it costs about \$12 to provide food for one adult, and you provide one drink ticket with the admission, you might charge \$15 per person. However, if the food is being provided by volunteers and you only have to cover the cost of plates and non-alcoholic beverages, you might charge \$5.
- Some organizations do not choose to charge a fee at all because they feel they would rather have the money spent on auction items. This is certainly a valid point of view, but remember that many people will not win any auction items and will, therefore, have attended the event free of charge. If this is the case with your auction, you might consider charging a small admission fee in the future.
- Consider providing discounts for seniors, children and/or families. For example, if the charge for adults is \$15, you might charge seniors and students \$12 and children \$5. A maximum charge will encourage larger families to participate; perhaps a maximum cost of \$30-\$40 per family if the cost is \$15 per adult.

Event Setup

It's important to set up your venue to encourage bidding—but also to encourage a community spirit. Of course, your setup will depend on the elements you choose to include—dinner, beverages, entertainment and the auction itself. Here are some hints:

- For your silent auction, it's best if you can fit all the auction items in one room. But if this isn't possible, be sure to give bidders a reason to circulate among all the tables by locating food and drink stations in all rooms. This is especially easy to arrange if you use the small plates option described above. Also try and put some popular items in each room, again to encourage bidders to visit all areas.
- Arrange your auction items by category. For example, have all the dining events in one place. Create labels for the tables so that bidders can find their favorite items easily.
- Allow plenty of room between tables. Don't arrange tables in one long row in the middle of the room with no room to move between them.

- Be sure that you have a fairly quiet location for your data entry people. No matter what type of system you use for calculating sales and producing receipts, these jobs require a location with minimal noise and interruptions.
- For your oral/live auction, an auditorium-type seating arrangement seems to work best in that it's easier for auctioneers to see who is bidding and who has won an item. However, if you're having a sit-down dinner and want to have your live auction during dessert, just have more auction helpers available so that no bids are missed.

Do you have any event success (or disaster!) stories you'd like to share? Send them to sara@communityauctionservices and we'll include them in a future newsletter issue!