

Do Professional Benefit Auctioneers Earn Their Fee? – a Case Study

By Jay Fiske, Auctioneer and Consultant

I have been a professional benefit (charity) auctioneer for over 20 years and in that time I have experienced countless ways I was able to help the client far exceed their expectations. Sometimes the difference was subtle and barely noticed by the guests or the client, although significant for the bottom line. Sometimes the technique or on-the-fly decision was so significant as to be obvious to all concerned – and was recognized as such by the client. As an example, I recall one event when after the “Raise the Paddle” I was informed the audience had just given \$250,000 in donations so on a whim, I asked “would anyone like to match all we just raised?” To the surprise of all, one person put their card high in the air and did in fact match the \$250,000! So, with one decision, I was able to boost the income for the client by an additional \$250,000!

While this one on-the-fly decision yielded a significant boost in income at that event and may appear to be a one of a kind event, I have now incorporated that “ask” for the match in to nearly every one of the charity auctions I conduct each year. About 6 times a year (10% of my auctions) someone does accept the opportunity and will match the Paddle Raise amount. Not asking is not getting! There are also other ways a professional benefit auctioneer justifies the fee paid. It can be as simple as making sure the sequence of the Live auction items is appropriate, the correct items are selected for the Live auction, and that any item that can be doubled up are approved by the donor in advance.

On a rare Saturday night off recently, I was able to watch my wife Corinne Fiske conduct an auction for a charity benefitting homeless teens. While there were many subtle ways I witnessed her shift the energy to boost the bidding (something I can see but most guests would never detect) resulting in higher bids for the items, there were three decisions I saw her make that jumped right out and were clearly something that would ONLY have been done by a well seasoned professional benefit auctioneer:

- *She pulled out a coconut cream pie from the “Dessert Dash” which had been donated by well known restaurateur Tom Douglas. The pie was used as a surprise opening item (her decision) and sold for \$1,200!*
- *She found out that many of the homeless kids did not have high school diplomas but a mentoring program was available to earn these kids a GED for \$150, something they could not afford. So, during the auction she asked how many guests would be willing to donate an extra \$150 to provide a GED for any street teen that was willing to get it. She was able to collect 25 donations at \$150 each, resulting in an added \$3,750 in unexpected event income.*

- *At the end of the Live auction Corinne noticed that the total raised in the Live portion was \$29,500 so without missing a beat after announcing this number she said “You know, we are only \$500 from \$30,000 and it would be great if we could hit that number tonight. Is there anyone willing to bump us up to \$30,000 by making a \$500 cash contribution?” Of course, someone did to the cheers of the audience.*

Now being able to add an additional \$5,450 “on-the-fly” may not appear to be a big deal, but considering that represents more than twice the fee paid for her services, hiring her was a real bargain for the client. It is highly doubtful any of these three decisions, and certainly not all of these would ever have been considered by an amateur non-professional benefit auctioneer. The decisions Corinne made came from having the experience to react to situations that do not present themselves at every event, but being able to recognize an opportunity when it occurs. There are literally dozens of “opportunities” at each event, and while no two events are the same, having someone who has the experience to recognize a potential revenue boosting situation on duty at the right time is money very well spent.

It is nearly impossible to know how much any given event can benefit from hiring a professional but one thing is clear – the professional will always be searching for ways to boost your income in a classy way, and the amount paid will almost certainly be less than the increase in income you will achieve from professional help.

Sometimes the experience of a professional on stage can defuse trouble spots when plans don’t work out right. Having someone controlling the microphone who will not panic, who has been down the path before and can lead the audience to where you want them regardless of distractions and unplanned events (too many examples to mention!) is often money well spent. Over the years we have conducted outdoor events in the middle of thunderstorms, by emergency lighting during blackouts, and dealing with drunk and disorderly guests who decide to make a “surprise” visit on stage or to the microphone. Keeping a sense of humor and having the ability to recover from any unforeseen situation is an insurance policy you get with a professional.

So the next time your committee suggests you can save some money by using a volunteer auctioneer, just remember that what that “free auctioneer” is costing you is what you will not earn even under ideal circumstances. When you evaluate the cost in that context, a paid professional auctioneer is a bargain.