

Author Q&A A HIGHER BID

How to Transform Special Event Fundraising with Strategic Benefit Auctions
By Kathy Kingston

Question: In your role as a professional auctioneer and as a consultant for fundraising auctions, what do you do?

Answer: I ignite generosity. I serve as an auctioneer. I educate staff and supporters of non-profit organizations on the subject of strategic fundraising, special events, and auctions. I teach workshops, seminars, and private classes on these and related subjects. I am a professional speaker. I consult with organizations when I am their auctioneer. I also provide consulting when an organization already has an auctioneer they love but needs my strategies and advice. I also mentor and train other professional auctioneers and auction businesses. I created and own the Fundraising Auction Academy and offer advanced workshops for auctioneers.

Question: Your book, *A Higher Bid*, has been described as a “guide for non-profit organizations to planning and executing more exciting, more lucrative fundraising auctions,” and one of your book’s central themes is that organizations can - and should - use a fundraising auction to communicate donor impact. Please explain.

Answer: Donors are very selective in how and why they give, so organizations that want to increase fundraising must help donors understand on a personal level how the donors’ gifts can make a difference. In *A Higher Bid*, I offer my strategies to strategically position the fundraising auction as a golden gateway to identifying, cultivating and engaging supporters in the organization’s mission. This is a huge paradigm shift away from the manner in which many organizations place an unnecessary amount of energy and resources on the “party” aspect and not nearly enough energy in helping event attendees understand the real reason for the event - fundraising. This costly faux pas results in auction committee organizers obsessing on the color of the table napkins and not on fundraising.

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Question: What motivated you to write “A Higher Bid?”

Answer: *A Higher Bid* brings a fresh approach to unlock what's needed to skyrocket fundraising auctions to the next level. The need has never been greater for nonprofit, education, and non-governmental-organization (NGO) sectors for innovative and successful fundraising, especially now, when governmental grants are declining and funding from foundations and granting sources are decreasing. More specifically, I wrote *A Higher Bid* for these reasons:

- Because most people do auctions wrong - untold money is left in the room!
- To wake up organizations who harm their own cause because they rely on old, outdated thinking and costly fundraising methods.
- To codify knowledge I have gained over many decades of working on fundraising auctions and consulting to help others.
- To expand my reach to a new audience beyond those who benefit from me as their auctioneer or consultant and those who attend my workshops or see my videos on *YouTube*.
- To advance the auction profession.
- To explain to non-profits how my strategies work.
- To showcase a new paradigm for auction fundraising and change people's thinking about how strategic benefit auctions can transform special event fundraising. *Note: this is a very important point for the professional fundraising associations as well as for association executives, boards of directors, foundations, and grantors.

Because more money can be raised by having organizational supporters understand and apply its strategic advice, *A Higher Bid* can help thousands of organizations and help transform the lives of millions of people around the world who contribute to and benefit from non-profits.

This book will be easily understood and entertaining for readers and can be quickly assimilated into an organization's auction planning and development program. *A Higher Bid* is filled with proven strategies, examples, tips, auction psychology, and useful graphics that boards of directors, volunteers, development professionals, students, and auction committees can use to maximize fundraising and to leverage trends in the new economy.

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Question: What kind of organizations do you work with?

Answer: I work with all kinds of organizations and individuals that can benefit from my book: nonprofits, schools, charitable organizations, and associations in every genre, as well as their volunteer supporters and staff members. I also work with professional auctioneers and auction companies.

Question: In *A Higher Bid*, you call attention to the single, biggest mistake that organizations make in having a fundraising auction. What is that mistake?

Answer: The mistake is that organizers misunderstand the power and potential of fundraisers and benefit auctions. Many think of them as merely one-time events or parties. As a result, they leave untold thousands of dollars in the room. Worse yet, many donors are never invited to stay connected with the organization after the doors close. After the event, they simply leave, taking their energy and dollars elsewhere.

When organizations fail to deeply engage donors and maximize fundraising, the impact is immense. This is a shame, because your auction proceeds matter deeply. The money raised at these events goes to feed hungry kids their only meal for the day, save injured and abandoned animals, fund lifesaving medical research, use technology to open communication for people with autism, prevent child abuse and neglect, stimulate downtown small business development, teach third graders to read, enrich communities through music and theater, stand steadfast by our wounded warrior veterans, restore hope and homes for tornado and flood victims, and much, much more.

Question: How can a strategic approach for auctions affect fundraising?

Answer: The number-one problem for many nonprofit organizations in this country is that they are not retaining their donors. A strong philanthropic approach to auction fundraising brings people into your organization and strategically ensures that you retain all of those donors, many of whom will upgrade their gifts over time until they give their ultimate gift. Benefit auctions can lead to an ongoing, inspiring culture of giving.

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Question: You talk in *A Higher Bid* about “Strategic Benefit Auctions: The New Catalyst for Philanthropy.” Please explain.

Answer: Fundraising auctions go far beyond those precious few hours at an event. The real work is year round and begins LONG before the auction and continues LONG after the auction.

Question: In “A Higher Bid,” you offer some great anecdotes about items and services you have auctioned off over the years. What are some of your favorites things you have auctioned off?

Answer: Live auction items that I have sold personally include:

- Naming rights for a newborn baby calf,
- A vasectomy for you and your cat,
- Release of a rehabilitated eagle,
- Gourmet dinner and wine for 10 couples at Katharine Hepburn’s estate with Jacques Pepin as chef,
- A tangy tangerine for \$2500,
- A \$10 bill for over \$1000,
- A deflated balloon for \$500, and a
- Reverse bridal shower for kids by a beloved principal getting married.

Question: In *A Higher Bid*, you state a philosophy that says, “In the benefit auction world, we are not in the auction business nor are we in the event or party business. We are in the relationship business.” Please elaborate.

Answer: Strategic benefit auctions are a catalyst for donors to make a long-term impact for causes that impassion them. Organizations can strategically raise millions *more* every year with a new approach that focuses first and foremost on connecting people to your cause. When designed and conducted strategically, benefit auctions are one of the most powerful ways to raise significantly more charitable dollars annually and foster long-term relationships with donors, old and new.

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Question: What kind of organizations should consider holding a fundraising auction?

Answer: Any organization – especially one that needs to raise more money, increase and engage donors, profoundly communicate their impact, and have more fun and excitement.

Question: Is *A Higher Bid* the first book that deals with fundraising auctions?

Answer: There are fewer than a dozen printed and e-books written on fundraising auctions, and many of these books are outdated. Books about fundraising and charity auctions fall into a category that focuses on showing the “how to” in planning and conducting benefit auctions. They come from an overarching event management perspective. These books offer productive methods and tips for countless details, planning steps, forms, worksheets, tips and techniques for nonprofits, schools, professional, and charitable organizations to raise money through auctions. Popular and best-selling books about event management and general fundraising only touch briefly on using auctions for fundraising.

A Higher Bid takes a long-term approach to engage nonprofit leadership and to position a charity auction as a long-term fundraiser and donor engagement strategy.

Question: You strongly recommend the hiring of a professional auctioneer for fundraising auctions. What is the rationale behind your recommendation?

Answer: In my nearly 30 years in this profession, I raise 20 to more than 200 percent MORE money when I follow - as an organization’s auctioneer - an amateur, the weatherman, a dad at the school, a VIP or celebrity, or even an art or antique auctioneer. A professional auctioneer who specializes in fundraising raises more funds. Why risk going without a professional?

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Question: What if an organization cannot afford to hire a professional auctioneer?

Answer: This is wrong thinking. Instead, organizations must not ask what a professional costs. They must ask, "How much MORE can a professional auctioneer raise." I call it "ROA," Return on Auctioneer. Organizations can no longer afford to use an inexperienced volunteer who leaves untold thousands of dollars in the room and does not serve as an ambassador of the mission who compellingly connects guests to the emotional impact of their bidding and giving at the auction. This short-sighted costly thinking loses millions of dollars per year across the country.

Question: Who could do the professional auctioneer's work as a substitute?

Answer: Nobody.

Kathy Kingston's Cardinal Rules for Successful Fundraising Auctions

- 1. Focus on Fundraising**
Show how guests can make a difference. Showcase your mission throughout your auction. Using compelling video, brief inspiring remarks and other communications, envelop your audience in the cause and show how their contribution matters to transform your clients and community.
- 2. Fill Your Audience with Power Bidders**
Audience development is #1. Take the time to research and cultivate. Remember, people give to people. A personal ask is the most important key to success.
- 3. Find the Right Match**
Solicit auction items that fit your guests. Know your crowd! Do they respond to rich and varied experiences while traveling or are they more excited about cultural and sporting events? Match your guests' interests. Complement your donated items and add excitement with consignment items.
- 4. Less is More**
Fewer items of greater value bring bigger results.
- 5. I Can Hear You Now**
Invest in a professional sound system. Your guests will respond best when they can hear and understand your mission and your auction items.

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6. **No BS**
No Boring Speeches.
7. **Stories not Stats**
Success stories inspire generosity - appeal emotionally, and it will pay off in the generous giving at the auction. Testimonial stories will encourage your supporters to continue to invest in your cause year-round.
8. **Don't Leave Money in the Room**
Ignite giving with a "Fund a Need Special Appeal" where a passionate, involved speaker does the "ask" to build emotional and financial support.
9. **Add Fun!**
Add profit-making revenue activities to keep those bid cards waving! Make sure your organization procures hot auction items that keep driving excitement and interest - items that fulfill fantasies and dream vacations and experiences.
10. **Why Risk It?**
Why risk it? Invest in a Professional Auctioneer. Retain an experienced professional benefit auctioneer who can interest, inspire and influence your guests to maximize your revenue.

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