

Getting the Goods

How to Acquire Donations for a Charity Auction

By Sandy Bradley

An auction is a great entry-level fundraising event. Asking for stuff is easier than asking for money and stuff can be readily converted to money. For new board members and other supporters, collecting auction donations is a good way to break the ice, and, with luck, some of your best auction solicitors will be empowered to become solicitors of major cash donations.

Everyone has some important auction solicitation tools at his or her disposal: a checkbook (plus MasterCard or Visa statements) and a personal address book. Use the first to solicit from businesses and the second to solicit from friends and associates.

Soliciting From Businesses

Every business you patronize wants more customers like you, so start by looking in your checkbook and on your MasterCard, Visa or other credit card statements.

Businesses generally try to get new customers through advertising and by word of mouth. Word of mouth is less expensive than advertising, and you are offering a lot of it. A business that donates will be listed in the auction catalog, and its merchandise or gift certificate will be displayed at the event, where it will be viewed by hundreds of people.

Most large corporations and chain stores make auction donations from their central office. The larger the business, the larger the potential gift- and usually the more red tape to deal with. Sometimes you will hit pay dirt with your first phone call, but more often you'll have to combine a dozen or so calls, letters, and appointments to get the job done. It's worth the effort.

First call the company and find out who is in charge of charitable giving. Get their name, title, address, and phone number. Next, call the office to which you were referred and find out how they like to focus their donations. Indicate that you will send them a letter about what your group does. Then send it off that day.

The letter should be brief and it should include:

—— Page 1 of 7 ——

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- A one- or two-sentence description of your organization. Make it very short. Point out how your mission is consistent with the business's giving plan.
- A brief summary of the event and number of people attending, how much you raised last year, how the money helped you complete an important project. (But remember, keep it short)
- A request that the business participate this year.

You can ask for a grant of a specified amount, which will make them a/the sponsor of the event, a donation of goods or services, or their enthusiastic attendance.

Corporate donors often see purchasing a batch of tickets as a public relations investment, so be prepared to offer a specific number of tickets for a generous amount in excess of the amount you would have charged per person. You might describe this as a "table" (if you do dinner seating), a reserved section with a perfect view of the items being sold, or a private preview and champagne reception prior to the time you open to the rest of your guests. Remember to thank these upscale cash donors in the catalog.

Keep in mind that many companies view this as a straight donation. They may leave their table completely empty, in which case it isn't a good idea to place the table center front, creating a dead space right in front of the auctioneer. Most likely the "corporate table" seats will be given to employees as gifts, or perhaps just posted on a bulletin board so that people can sign up if they'd like to go.

How the way the tickets are used will affect where the guests' tables should be located. If you get the top executives and you know they support your cause, seat them near the front, where they can set a good example by bidding high. If the table is filled from a sign-up list, your guests may be more interested in socializing (sometimes very loudly) than in making the auction work. If that's the case, seat them in a back corner.

When soliciting from large corporations, you'll find some companies that say "never" and some companies that say "always." Companies that say "never" probably do have a charitable giving program somewhere, or at least concerned individuals who can make an exception for you. You are more likely to be successful if you know somebody, or know somebody who knows somebody in the company, and can get you in the back door. Have them ask who is in charge of community relations or charitable giving, and ask who disperses overruns or discontinued items. "Never" might mean that they

never write big checks, but that they do have discontinued merchandise they could give you. Ask.

It might take ten phone calls and several letters to get a \$500 donation. Look at all ten calls as part of a cumulative process. Obviously, it is not the case that the first nine calls failed and the last one succeeded. It probably took all ten to succeed.

Businesses that "always" donate are prepared to send you their standard donation. Take it. But if you know someone within the company, contact that person as well, and try for sponsorship, a cash donation, or other special donation opportunities.

Businesses select their standard donation in several ways:

- **Discontinued merchandise:** Items come back from distributors and will not be included in next year's catalog. They have to be disposed of anyway, so the business might as well give them to you.
- **New offerings:** The company wants to get the word out about its new products and generate brand familiarity.
- **The last item on the shelf:** It's the one that never sells, says an old business adage. Nobody wants it, even though it is identical to ones that did sell. That item takes up shelf space which could be accommodating merchandise that is turning over and earning the company more money.
- **Prototypes:** The company tried making widgets in seven colors, but decided to manufacture only blue ones. It can give you the other six colors.
- **Seconds:** Merchants expect merchandise to be absolutely uniform. If one vase is a quarter of an inch taller than the rest, it looks wrong alongside the others on the shelf, or it can't be sold in the same fitted box. If you're looking at only one vase, you'd never know it was slightly taller. So seconds are not always second-rate.
- **Space available:** If someone is teaching a class that can accommodate twelve people, and only eight register, the empty four seats can be offered on a "space available" basis. A full class looks much more successful and those extra four people are four more word-of-mouth advertisers. It doesn't cost the business any more to give away seats that do not sell. Classes, theaters, and hotels can all offer you a "space-available" donation. Just write those words on the donation form, and make sure they appear on the gift certificates.

- **Subscriptions:** The most efficient way for a publication to solicit subscribers for the next year is to send a renewal form. The advertising it takes to get brand new subscribers is much more expensive. Your gift certificate can read, "A One-Year Subscription to a New Subscriber." The donor hopes that the winning bidder will renew the subscription next year.
- **Behind-the-scenes adventure:** The company might offer a tour of the factory or a ride in a prototype. The police department might offer a shift with the cop on the beat. Again, it helps to know someone on the inside
- **Gift certificates:** Donating a \$50 gift certificate is usually a sound investment for any business. Only one third of all gift certificates get used; the rest are lost or allowed to expire. Gift certificates that do not get used are of no cost to the donor, but they still sold at the auction and made you money. Only the certificates that actually bring in customers will get used. When they do get used, the donor has paid the wholesale value of the goods, so a \$50 gift certificate costs the donor only \$18-\$25. That's much less than the business would have spent on advertising to bring that same customer through the door.

How to Ask

You can ask for donations by mail, by phone or in person. If you're there in person, it's a lot harder to turn you down. If the person you've contacted says, "We'll think about it" or "We'll get back to you on that," your response should be, "Oh, let's just get it done right now. Here, I've already filled out most of the form." Then thank them for being so considerate of your time. If this takes more *chutzpah* than you can muster, tell the potential donor when you will return, and make it soon!

If you are not sure who at that business can make the decision, call first and try to find out. Get the answer before you drop in or write a personal letter. With your family and friends, you might be able to complete the whole transaction over the phone.

When you approach a business, it is important to specify what you're looking for. Suggest something of medium value from their inventory, but be specific in your request. The better your connection, the greater should be your request. Don't just ask for "something," because that gives no guidance. (As Lily Tomlin said: "I always wanted to be somebody when I grew up. I realize

now that I should have been more specific.") And ask for something good. If it's going to be worth your time asking, their time responding, and the auction's time selling, it should be worth the investment. Suggesting a gift of high value also gives you the room to ask for less pricey items if the first suggestion doesn't fly.

When you ask, emphasize the positive opportunities rather than the urgent need or the insignificance of your budget in the face of the problems you're addressing. No one is inspired to fund losers or organizations that show no vision or promise. Rather than addressing the scope of the problem, emphasize the value of the effort they will be helping to finance.

Don't ignore mom-and-pop businesses. They really count on returning customers, and they really understand the dynamics of word-of-mouth advertising. That's how they survive. They also value community and so can be expected to appreciate the community organization you are working for.

Soliciting From Friends

Besides all the businesses you are acquainted with, take out that little black book or refer to the list of phone numbers by the phone in the kitchen. Consider the donor for a moment. How do they like to spend their time? What are they proud of? What is their secret pleasure?

Does she love to work in her garden? Ask for tree pruning, weeding, rose pruning, landscaping help, roto-tilling.

Is he famous for his homemade lasagna? Ask for lasagna, either frozen or to be delivered to the buyer at a mutually agreeable time.

Does she have a boat? Ask her to take somebody sailing; add lunch.

Does he sew? He can sew the dress of somebody's choice, or a wedding dress, or kids' clothes, or doll clothes, or make a quilt, or sails.

Is she into woodworking? Ask for a bookcase, a stool, or a tool box.

Is he into hang gliding? How about taking a guest on his next flight.

Does she love her formal garden? She can host a tea party for eight, or make a bouquet once a month all spring.

Does he have a getaway in the mountains? He can let somebody else use it- he certainly can't be on vacation year-round.

Is she a stargazer? Ask for a trip to the mountains with her telescope to see the meteor shower.

Is he a sports fan? He can turn over a pair of his season tickets for a game or two.

Is he a do-it-yourselfer? Ask for a rocking horse for the kids, or a bookcase, or two hours of handyman services.

In short, you're asking your friends to donate their time doing things they like to do or sharing their treasures for the good of the cause. They will be honored that you know them so well that you can ask for something they would be pleased to share.

And if you want to feel extra confident about soliciting from friends, here's a tip: Start by making a donation yourself. Figure out the best thing you can do for the auction and fill out the donation form. Add a little extra special something in the TLC department, like a lunch for the drive up to your vacation cabin. Then when you approach your friends and associates, you will be asking for a commitment like the one that you have made yourself. Let them know what you donated and tell them how excited you are about it.

Expanding the Horizon

Solicitation opportunities present themselves all year, so don't confine yourself to the few weeks before the annual auction.

When you make a major purchase, ask the vendor to donate to your auction. Give him your card or remind him of your name and your cause, and as soon as you can muster a donation form (or get hold of one from last year's auction) get it filled out and signed. Strike while the iron is hot! You've just spent money at their store and they're likely to be in a receptive mood.

On every gift-giving holiday, in-laws go to great expense to buy inappropriate gifts. You will never use yours, nor will your friends use theirs. Gather up these brand new white elephants and donate them to the auction. Someone is likely to buy them for their relatives.

Make it a habit to show up at close-out sales, clearances, and liquidation sales. Take your donation forms and ask the merchants to donate. They want to clear the floor for new items which will make them better profits. They need to get the old stuff out of their way and move on. You can help!

Preparing for the Auction

Once you have the commitment from a donor, follow up on getting either the paperwork needed or the item they have donated. If someone has donated a week at their cottage, try to get photos of the place or brochures about the area to help market the item to potential buyers at the auction. If there is an item to pick up, set a date and time to collect it or a deadline for arrival if they are shipping it to you. If it does not arrive on time, follow up immediately. It is better to have people send their donations immediately for you to store than to count on them to remember to send it just before the auction. Unless the donations are perishable, you will save yourself lots of anxiety by having the items in your possession well before the event. Remember, it is your responsibility to get donated items secured in their final form so that the buyers will walk away with everything needed.

Especially with the more valuable items, try to show them off to their best advantage. If you have solicited dinner for six at someone's home, make an elegant place setting on the display table or show pictures of the actual foods or locations involved.

But don't make a big fancy display for everything. Prioritize your efforts. If the donation is small and/or self-explanatory, the silent bidding sheet may be plenty. A massage? Dinner for two at a restaurant? You wouldn't need a special display for those. You do, however, need to be sure that the approximate location where a gift certificate can be used is made clear. Provide all the information people need when deciding whether or not to bid and buy.

Sandy Bradley, a licensed auctioneer since 1979, is the host of "Sandy Bradley's Potluck" on National Public Radio. This article is adapted from her new book, Benefit Auctions: A Fresh Formula for Grassroots Fundraising, published by Pineapple Press. To order Benefit Auctions—a comprehensive planning guide that includes sample solicitation scripts, forms and letters—visit www.pineapplepress.com or call (800) 746-3275.