

#INTERVIEW: Sherry Truhlar, President of Red Apple Auctions, Conducts Benefit Auctions for Nonprofit Organizations

29th February 2012 By Don Akchin — Leave a Comment

Sherry Truhlar, President of **Red Apple Auctions**, conducts benefit auctions for nonprofit organizations throughout the U.S. She founded the company after more than a decade in corporate sales, marketing and event management. The interview was conducted by Don Akchin, a principal of Nonprofit Marketing 360 and a frequent contributor to the MKCREATIVE blog.

MKC: Did you grow up wanting to be an auctioneer?

SHERRY: No, not at all. I decided, wouldn't it be fun to do that fast talk, the chant? I took a week of vacation from **General Electric**, where I was a global marketing manager, went out to **auction school**, and learned the chant. But I realized very quickly that only a small portion of school is devoted to learning the chant. The rest is teaching someone how to run a business. I thought maybe this was something I could do part-time. So I became a licensed auctioneer.

MKC: What convinced you to go from part time to full time?

SHERRY: At first, I didn't have a lot of movement on the auction side – until I won a competition. All first-year license holders are invited by the Virginia Auctioneers Association to participate in a Rookie of the Year competition, held in January. I won it in January of '04, and another auctioneer said, 'Hey, come and see us. I think we can put you to work on the floor if nothing else.' I think I did two auctions for him, maybe three. Meanwhile more changes were taking place at GE. There was an opportunity for layoffs and I volunteered and got the layoff package. Auctioneering was one of the professions I wanted to try. The other was Plus Size Modeling.

MKC: Did one take off? Both take off?

SHERRY: Both of them took off. I went to Miami and got a great agency down there. I had to move down there for five months out of the year. When they call you for a modeling job, they call you the day before or maybe three days before. So as I was sitting in Florida, between modeling jobs, I started cold calling nonprofits about auctions, and I found some – some that to this day I'm still working with.

I've since left the modeling. Modeling is very age-sensitive. But I enjoyed it for seven years. I had always wanted to work overseas. I had taken jobs with the big corporations, thinking that would help me. But it wasn't until I pursued an interest of my own that I got to work overseas.

MKC: When you called nonprofits in Miami, was that the first time you had considered working with nonprofits?

SHERRY: When I was at auction school, they brought in speakers to talk about different areas of the auction industry. One of the speakers talked about benefit auctions. When he was explaining it, it started to click more for me. I thought, Okay, I'm doing events right now at GE, I understand about hotel negotiation, I understand about food and beverage contracts, I understand a lot of these elements that go into a benefit auction already. So that was a natural segue for me.

MKC: Are you still working with clients in Florida or is it based out of Virginia?

SHERRY: Actually it's grown to be national. The bulk of our work is still in the Washington, D.C. area, but this past Saturday I was doing an event in Miami that grossed \$1.9 million – and that's a long-time client – but I also had an auctioneer up here in D.C. that day. This past year I traveled out to Wisconsin, New Hampshire, Arizona, Alabama, Tennessee. It's grown.

MKC: You mentioned on the website you have a trademarked process for making auctions work. Are there some tips you can share without revealing any trade secrets!?

SHERRY: I have observed that there are better ways to do certain things than what has traditionally been done, specifically with regards to the silent auction. Traditionally, auctioneers have focused on the live auction. I understand that. The type of personality that is drawn into the auction business likes the performance. But there are lots of missed opportunities in the silent auction because of that. You can make more money or improve what you're making if you just make some simple changes.

It's not just about the performance of the auctioneer. It's about the performance and the planning. You've got to have a good blend. When it comes down to it, people are there to have a good time, and if they don't have a good time, they're not going to be compelled to come back next year. People of means have a lot of choices on a Saturday night. So the benefit auction needs to be entertaining.

MKC: Are there nonprofits that should not use auctions?

SHERRY: Yeah, there are a lot. Here's the deal: Auctions are an enormous amount of work. They take a tremendous amount of manpower. I interviewed 25% of my auction clients last year, and asked the auction chairs, how many hours do you – just you – spend putting this auction together? The average was 1,000 hours. That's six months of full-time work. The clients that I surveyed are making anywhere from \$40,000 gross at an event to over a million. So that's a wide spread. But nonetheless, that's a lot of work. That's a lot of time. So if you're getting started as a nonprofit and you don't have the volunteer base that can step up and do this for you, and you think you're going to manage this in house, I would have reservations about that decision.

MKC: If they do hire an outsider like yourself, there's still a big volunteer commitment, isn't there?

SHERRY: Even if they hire an outsider like myself, I'm not going to do it for them. I'm going to tell them how to do it. I think a wonderful reason why you should be doing auctions is, they are incredibly profitable. And it's money that's virtually guaranteed. I don't like to tell people to do an auction, but once someone decides to do an auction, then I say, 'You'd better call me first, because I don't want you wasting your time, and there's a lot of ways to waste your time in planning an auction. Once you've committed, talk to me.'

MKC: You do something on your blog that I haven't seen done before: you have blog posts that are podcasts or videos. It's like a live workshop, almost. What's the thinking behind doing that?

SHERRY: We realized we weren't promoting our videos and a lot of people like them. Also there are different learning styles out there. My base is the volunteers. They're women, they've got 400 things to do in a day – working, washing dishes, shuttling kids – so the learning style has to be portable to a degree. They can download the podcasts to an iPod. As far as videos, I think some people just learn better when they're watching something or seeing somebody. It's really just a way to reach more people, in a way that works for them.

MKC: And how long have you been blogging?

SHERRY: Since 2009. The business came first. I took a class on how to build a better website, and I built it and rolled it out, and we've been using it for three years. We're getting ready to do a new version of it, but it has served me well.

MKC: A lot of bloggers I talk to initially want to blog because they hope to create a dialog or a conversation. Has that been your experience, or were you going for something different?

SHERRY: Well, I would love to have that. But I will be honest and say, the volunteers I'm reaching don't seem to want to. I didn't start the blog with the idea of having dialog, it was to get some helpful information out there.

MKC: Has the downturn that's been going on for three years had any effect on your business?

SHERRY: No, not on my business, and not on my clients' auctions, which is even better: 76% of my clients over the past three years have had record-breaking events.

You can follow Sherry on her blog or her [website](#).

Guest blogger [Don Akchin](#) writes frequently about marketing and philanthropy at [donakchin.com](#)

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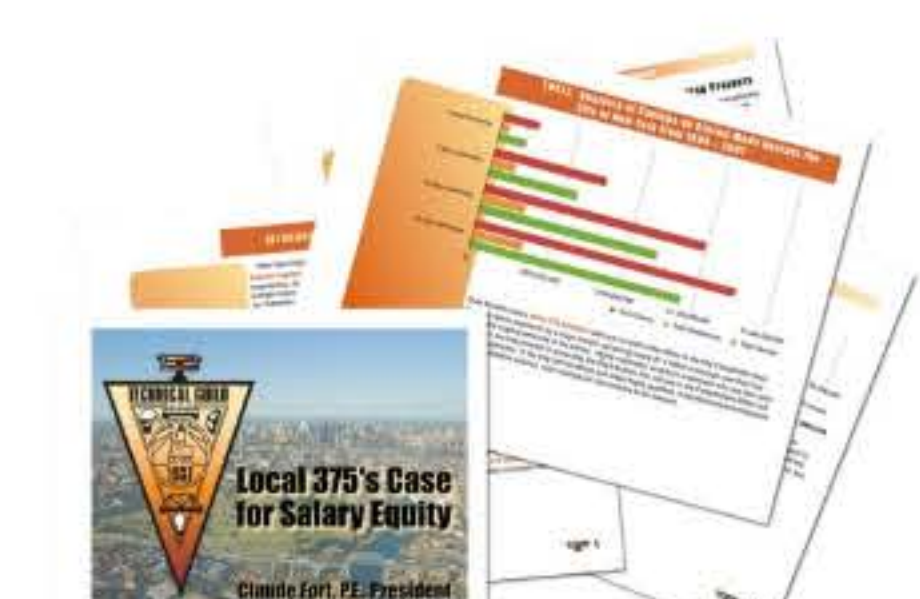
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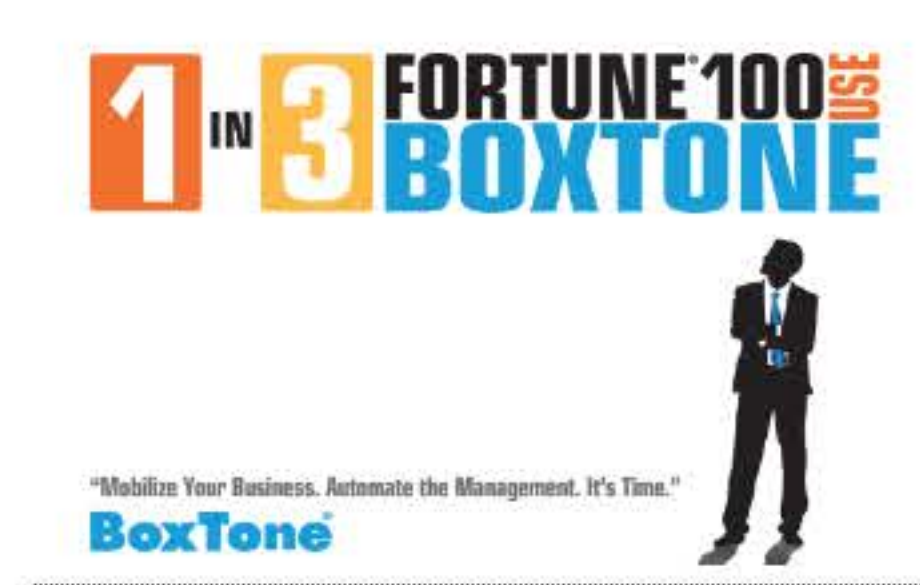


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