

Making Your Silent Auction Slick: How Handheld Devices and Other Electronics Glam Up Your Gala

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By Sherry Truhlar

Picture a silent auction with no bid sheets. Instead, guests bid using an electronic device. Depending on the vendor, the device resembles a television remote, an iPhone or a hotel key card. Guests swipe a card, punch a screen, or text in a number to bid on the desired item. Bids are recorded instantly, digitally.

Newfangled electronic devices reached their tipping point in 2010 and seemingly appeared out of nowhere to be spotted at many of the trendiest events in major cities. Each vendor has a slightly different system and pricing structure, though they share the same general approach. The systems are used in the silent auction and cash appeal. They're not yet a perfect fit for bidding in the live auction portion of the gala, where speed and crowd dynamics are relied upon heavily to influence the final bid price. So what are the advantages of these devices?



1. Ease of bidding

By far, the biggest advantage is how easy it is to bid. Rarely are venues ideal for silent auctions. If you have 600 guests and 100 items squeezed into an ill-shaped space, the devices make it easy to bid without leaving your group conversation. You can stand in the bar line and still actively bid on that trip to Tahoe. Guests still seem to take an interest in browsing through each item upon arrival, but once they've seen everything, they tend not to return. They often place their first bids during an initial walk-around while standing in front of the package. Thereafter, they bid from wherever they happen to be. So if your silent auction is crowded (lots of people with no room to maneuver), this technology is a definite plus. It's also helpful for tight timelines. For instance, one client had an exceptionally long program. To allow time for the additional awards during the dinner, the cocktail reception was slashed from 90 to 45 minutes. Had the host used the devices, the silent auction could have closed later, during the meal or program. Guests would have had more time to peruse the items online and bid.

2. Men love them

Not to say that women don't like them, but the marked difference here is with the men. Silent auctions have traditionally been the domain of women, but give a male one of these gadgets, and — as one guest told me — “He's hogging it like it's our television remote.” If your auction attracts more men (think golf tournaments) than women, it's a point worth considering. Another thought is to hand out one device per person, instead of one device per couple. That way, both partners have a shot at “controlling the remote.”

3. Streamlined appearance

Remove the bid sheets from your silent auction tables, and voila! The difference is remarkable. Tables become sleek as space opens up for items to be properly showcased. Without the added clutter of bid sheets and pens, your silent auction appears cleaner and more sophisticated.

4. Instant gratification

Because the bids are recorded instantly, you can immediately get a sense for how well you're doing. No longer will you need to walk around staring at bid sheets, “guesstimating” the totals. Instead, you can proactively monitor your auction while it's in progress. Furthermore, the devices allow the organization and auction guests to see what items haven't yet attracted a bid. These items can be promoted to guests, tempting them to bid on the last few “great deals.”

5. Facilitates check-out

Groups that have not invested in or mastered auction software tend to stumble when it comes to the check-out and cashiering processes. If check-out has been your nemesis, you'll love the speed at which you can generate invoices and other reports that make it easy to see who owes what.

6. Less conflict

Traditional silent auctions tend to close tables all at once or in sections. Both of these methods seem to bring out the worst in people. Like shoppers on Black Friday, some guests become aggressive to protect a desired item. They may jockey positions to place final bids on items, or deviously hide pens and bid sheets to prevent others from “stealing” (i.e. bidding) on “their” item. With these technology tools, that can't happen. Silent auction tables are closed electronically, on schedule. Usually the system is programmed to shut off at a given time. For instance, if the tables are scheduled to close at 8:30 pm and a guest's last bid isn't received by 8:30 pm, that guest loses the item. It's hard to argue with a computer!

7. You might make more money

Vendors point to gains as high as 50% over paper-based bidding. My take is that you'll enjoy higher gains if your group has never invested in any auction improvements. If you've been making changes along the way, either from self-education or working with a creative consultant or auctioneer, you might not see much of an improvement. So what's the right answer for you? It depends on your goals and what you're trying to achieve. Each vendor has its own approach.

The Top Players

IML: Meeting planners may recognize this company for its interactive clickers used at conferences to poll an audience, among other things. IML adapted its audience response technology to work for silent auctions and cash donations. Registered guests are given a card (similar to a hotel key or credit card) containing their bidder information. By sliding the card into a device resembling a TV remote, guests can bid and donate. The devices can be given to each person or scattered about on tables, leaving the guests to plug their key cards into any handy device. Because IML sets up its own secure wireless system, the technology can be used anywhere — including deep beneath the earth's surface in wine caves, for example.

Bidpal: Similar to IML, Bidpal sets up its own private wireless network on site. The obvious difference between the two companies is in appearance. Bidpal gives each guest a handheld device that resembles, and responds, like an iPhone. Although the devices are straightforward to use, staff is available on site to respond to questions or troubleshoot. It's a high-tech look to the traditionally low-tech silent auction.

Qtogo: Whereas Bidpal gives you a device that looks like an iPhone, Qtogo banks on the assumption that you'll already be carrying your own phone, so why not just use that? Qtogo doesn't set up a private network. It lets guests place bids using phones via texting, calling in bids, or working with an on-site volunteer to place a bid directly into the system. Because the company relies on existing wireless networks, costs are lower. Texting charges, if any, are the responsibility of the bidder. If you manage large events (think of a conference, or a stadium filled with fans), this approach offers cost-effective scalability.

AES (Auction & Event Solutions): Having been in business for more than 20 years, AES has had time to develop several benefit auction tools. Its flagship Touch-Pad technology offers wireless touch screens that are about the size of a laptop. Upon registering, guests are given a bid card that resembles a credit card. When they want to bid, they approach one of the Touch-Pads setup around the silent auction area and either swipe the bid card for identification, or enter a bid by touching the screen of the Touch-Pad. Recently AES added smartphone bidding as an upgrade to the existing technology. It allows guests to use their smartphones to bid, even if they aren't attending the live gala. Pricing models vary, affected by item and guest count, as well as staff required. To give you a range, a smaller event of 200 guests is priced out from around \$1,100 to \$5,000, depending on the company. **MM&E**

Benefit auctioneer Sherry Truhlar, CMP, BAS, teaches planners of fundraising auctions how to maximize revenues for greater success with nonprofit and school galas. Her expertise has been tapped by major publications (e.g. Town & Country, Wash Post Magazine, AUCTIONEER, The Eleusis), television programs (e.g. E! Style, TLC), and conferences (CMP Conclave, National Auctioneers Association Convention, regional MPI groups). Her company, Red Apple Auctions, offers auctioneers, classes and products. Learn more at www.RedAppleAuctions.co

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