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Benefit speaks to fundraising auctioneer **Greg Quiroga** about the fine—and not-so-fine—points of selling to the crowd.

By Tim Gaskin
Photographs: Brett Ascarelli

Sell, Sell, *Sell!*



IN 2001, GREG QUIROGA accepted a full-time marketing position with an interactive company. By chance, the firm happened to have an industrial auction wing. After attending his first live auction, Quiroga knew that he had found his place. Soon he was one of the firm's leading auctioneers.

Seeking to further his professional knowledge, Quiroga attended the Missouri Auction School. Within three years, he was working with the nationally-renowned charity-auction firm Reynolds & Buckley. Since that time, he has conducted hundreds of fundraising auctions, raising millions of dollars throughout the country for charities. As a successful live entertainer of sorts, Quiroga has developed distinct routines for each category of auction items. His routines are engaging, entertaining, and intended to stimulate and encourage the audience's involvement. His energetic stage presence promotes generous and competitive bidding and is a boon to the nonprofits that employ him.

His gregarious nature, quick wit, and crowd-pleasing demeanor have made Quiroga a hit on the nonprofit circuit. *Benefit* magazine asked him to reveal his techniques and strategies for a successful charity auction.

BENEFIT: You don't call yourself an "auctioneer." You call yourself a "fundraising auctioneer." What's the difference? QUIROGA: One of the key differences is that in a fundraising environment, what we're doing is more akin to theater than to auctioneering. The vocabulary used and the ways in which I interact with people are radically different in that environment. There is a level of sophistication that is necessary in order to be able to interact and engage a crowd like that. And if you're selling cattle in Cincinnati, cars in Sacramento, or technology liquidations down the peninsula in Redwood City, it's radically different from interacting with people at an event in San Francisco or New York or Seattle or Portland.

Are fundraising auctions a form of elite peer pressure? Well, you need to be able to create an environment where people who like to fulfill their philanthropic potential in a public atmosphere can do so in a room of their peers.

Is a fundraising auction considered art and entertainment? Think of it as theater. Few things happen on stage accidentally. In a good theatrical production you're after applause; in a good fundraising production you're after bids. The difference is, as a fundraising auctioneer, much of what I do is done right before I step on stage the night of an event. Getting up on stage and doing the actual auction is the most fun part of what I do. It's really what I look forward to. One of the golden rules of fundraising is to remember that no event deserves to exist. Every event has to prove itself worthy every year. Every event is the momentum builder for the next year, and no event lives in a vacuum. So every time you do an event, you're setting the stage for the success and the challenge for the year to come.

What's the difference between a gala and a gala with a live auction? A well-structured auction can raise a lot of money. It can also raise awareness for the charity, and it can help bring in new supporters. The goal of an auction event is to do all of those effectively. A gala with an auction offers a special appeal.

Is a gala without an auction less likely to capture as much goodwill and to raise as much money as one with an auction? I wouldn't go that far. There are places where an auction isn't necessary. For example, take the opening night of the ballet. They raised more than a million dollars. There is nothing, as an auctioneer, that I could do to add to that. It's

just not appropriate. But where it is appropriate is where the goal is more than just to make friends and have a good party. An auction can help raise more money.

Then what's the difference between an event with a paid auctioneer and an event with a person who works, possibly a board member or a celebrity, trying to sell some items? We charge a fee for what we do because it enables us to focus on this full time. In the course of doing 100 events each year, there's a lot of expertise that we develop that can be applied to other clients. That experience enables us to get involved in planning as well as execution. We're able to say, "You know what? The event would accomplish a lot more if we did it this way."

So do you raise more money than a guest auctioneer? In the long run, yes, absolutely. In the short run, probably. It's hard to guarantee that we're going to raise more money if we just parachute in and do the auction. We get involved early on to try to help our clients set the stage for a successful evening, and we encourage people to use attendees' time efficiently and respectfully. From the

moment you walk into an event to the moment you check out, everything should flow as close to plan as possible. We try to encourage our clients to work with us to come up with that plan.

Do you get paid up front? No. We could charge more than we do, and there are other auctioneers who do, but that's not the point. The point is to help clients build sustainable events that are going to be there for years and to do so in a way that is also going to enable us to remain the auctioneer. We get a contract in place, we charge our fee after the event is finished, and we always guarantee that our clients are happy. We've never billed an unhappy client. I've never had an unhappy client.

After you first meet with an organization, get to know it and understand its message, what's the next step? We sit down and find out where things are at. How is the event progressing? How much are they really going to need to make? So the first thing that I do is just try to figure out where we are. Each one of these events represents a unique political atmosphere. You're working with staff, volunteers, and board members at a variety of levels who are all being asked to help bring in

auction lots, donors, and other board members. It's a fun challenge, it really is, as difficult as this seems at times. I mean, to be able to have a positive impact and to help raise millions of dollars for worthy causes? What a wonderful role to play in this world.

Who should hire you as an auctioneer? Any fundraising event that does an auction, big or small. To be fiscally responsible, a fundraising event should aim at making at least \$40,000–\$50,000 in a live auction. Honestly, that's about the minimum that you should be doing if you're going to do all that work.

How do you ensure early on that an organization will have a certain amount of auction lots and that those lots have a certain amount of substance? One of the first conversations we have should examine the year before. Was it a success? Was it a financial success? Was it an "emotional" success for the people who attended? This lets me know where we need to be aiming. Are we riding an upward trend, or are we trying to turn something around? As for keeping things

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fresh, we see what things are selling for, what things sold for, and then start talking about spicing it up, bringing in a few new auction lots. One of the things that we tell people is that you don't need to completely reinvent your event or your auction every year. If you can get a few new lots and a few new bidders every year, you'll continue to build success.

What are the rules? Well, here's another one of the cases where it's the difference between a fundraising auctioneer versus a volunteer. The number of items that we do is dictated by how long we want the auction to be. You should have a minimum of 15 items which, for us, translates into about half an hour. We work at a pace of two minutes per lot. It's engaging and respectful, but it's like clockwork. And don't apologize for doing an auction. If you're going to get everybody in a room and you're going to get them all fired up to support a particular charity, then don't undersell their passion.

What's the strategy on stage? The strategy is defined before the program is designed and finalized. We put the lots in order to make the most sense so there's a flow both financially and emotionally. Like theater, you want to climax in the second act. You want to build up to that. And after that climax, you still have a few more lots. You kind of want to view it as a heartbeat. You have this up and down flow. Any time an auction lot sells for a lot or does really well, any time there's a ton of excitement in a room, there's a buzz among the crowd. There are two ways to work with that. You can either stand on stage and wait for the buzz to die down, which is death, or you can plow straight ahead, knowing that the next lot you've been banking on might be slightly less valuable. It's a bit of a downbeat moment, following the climax, but it's okay that it doesn't sell for three times its value.

You say two or three lines and then you're up and running? I'm just an auctioneer. I'm a spokesman. My role is to know my auction lots and be able to talk about them in a way that engages people, and to sell them for more money than anybody else could. The purpose is essentially, in a loving way, to challenge the crowd and then transfer power to me. Part of what we do is help ensure that when the guests come in the door, they know that their donation has yet to happen. Buying a ticket is not a donation in this world. So somebody introduces me and sets the tempo, including the history and background of the event.

Does the faster you go mean that you are going to raise more money? No, absolutely not. That's actually the antithesis. In a fundraising environment, the first and foremost thing you have to do is take care not to alienate the crowd. You have to be understandable, you have to be able to engage them personally, and you have to know your lots well enough so that you are not looking at [items] for the first time.

Do you ever reopen a lot or an auction item after bidding closes? This is a good point, because one of the things that we always say is that we'll always re-open the lot in favor of whatever the event is or the charity is. One reason we do this is to try and raise money for a good cause. If you're trying to get a

bargain here, and you're trying to get something for as little as possible, there are a lot of places you can do that. A fundraising event shouldn't be one of them.

What percentage of auction items are not redeemed? Forty-five percent of the people who buy something at a fundraising auction don't redeem it. So 45 percent of the people who buy dinners or wine tastings or tours or trips don't end up [collecting]. Part of not redeeming is knowing the money is going to the charity.

What's the strangest auction item that you see a lot? Lasik eye surgery. No offense to the Lasik surgeons who make the donations, but how often do you head into an event thinking "I'm going to find an eye doctor tonight. I'm going to have a few drinks and then buy laser eye surgery"?

Can celebrities enhance an auction? Celebrities can do more for an auction by donating auction lots than they can as auctioneers. Part of the reason is that celebrities have spent their entire life making everything about them, because they have to. That's how you have to be in order to survive as a celebrity in this world, especially in Hollywood. One of the best lots, at a school in Marin, for years and years and years, was for Robin Williams to come to your home and read bedtime stories to your kids for two hours. Robin's kids went to the school and he donated that a few times. Now everybody that reads

this magazine is going to try to get Robin to do this. But it was a fantastic lot because it's just something you can't buy somewhere else.

When did you know this was for you? The very first time I did a fundraising event, I walked off the floor and I knew. I knew beyond a shadow of doubt I had found my path. I'd been searching for a path all of my working life, always keeping my mind and eyes open for something that was going to be it. Slept so well that night and slept fantastic every night since.

Any advice for anyone who wants to get into the auction business? Pick

a few charities and volunteer as a spotter. Go. If you can work at a fundraising event as a spotter, it's going to give you an idea of what they're like and, sooner or later, you're going to meet somebody who does fundraising auctions for a living and you'll have a conversation about whether or not it's a path you want to go down.

What happens if people stop doing auctions? What's your exit strategy? It's the second oldest profession and it's probably intertwined with the first, we'll leave it at that. But the way politics in America is going now, there are more and more auctions coming our way. If not, I guess I'll just wind up talking fast to myself in the shower. **B**

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