

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

## Charities turn to online auctions to boost donations

By: Richard Ruelas



Art teacher Heather Wilson coordinated Dobson Academy's recent Art for the Heart online auction.

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Lunch with the principal of Dobson Academy had attracted a respectable bid of \$55. Then, in the closing hours of the auction, two people started placing dueling bids, raising the price to \$75, then \$80, then \$100 and, finally, \$110. Sold, to the person clicking the mouse.

The two bidders did not eye each other warily or hover over bid sheets. Instead, the two squared off online, with one of the contenders possibly unaware of the eleventh-hour bidding war.

Dobson Academy, a private school in Chandler, has joined a growing number of non-profits moving their fundraising auctions online.

The hope is that the longer bidding time, wider pool of potential bidders and lack of social pressures present at a live auction can boost prices.

"The biggest advantage is you can reach more people," said Heather Wilson, an art teacher at Dobson, who coordinated the auction to benefit the school's Art for the Heart charity. "You can reach people you don't even know."

Jon Carson, CEO of cMarket, the Cambridge, Mass., company that handles online auctions, said a recent company survey indicated that the biggest reason most charities and schools hold online auctions is to reach a broader group of potential bidders.

"It's a great source of frustration for fundraisers to know that 50 percent or 90 percent of their donor base isn't in the room," he said.

Besides the boost from people wanting to give to a certain charity, the company offers groups the chance to list items on an umbrella site, [www.biddingforgood.com](http://www.biddingforgood.com), where

they can attract bidders who don't know a thing about the charity but who want a particular item.

Carson said 25 percent of winning-bid revenue comes from biddingforgood.com members.

Charities can put up items they procure themselves or choose from big-ticket items provided by cMarket. Carson said some of the latter items, such as an afternoon in a fighter jet and cruises, can serve as window dressing to gin up excitement in the auction.

Those big-ticket items are sold on a consignment basis. It costs nothing to post them. And the charity pockets any cash above the minimum-bid amount.

For its trouble, cMarket takes 9 percent of the auction total, although Carson said the company is considering a new fee structure that would lower that percentage based on volume of sales.

### **Big-ticket buzz**

Nancy Vargo of United Animal Friends in Prescott said her group added some big-ticket items from cMarket's consignment store during an auction this year. They didn't sell, but they generated buzz, she said.

"It definitely adds excitement saying we have a trip to France," she said. "But when people go online, it's the rabbit figurine that they bid on."

Janet Arnold, producing director for the Arizona Jewish Theatre Company, said she's learned from her group's two online auctions that tickets and gift certificates do well.

"You'll get at least face value for gift cards," she said.

But items that need to be seen may not garner as much online as they would at a live silent auction, she said.

"Artwork and jewelry, people would rather see in person," Arnold said. "You might have a tougher time with those."

Although the theater has a base of older supporters, she said Internet access has not appeared to be a problem.

Arnold heard about the Web site at a live seminar put on by cMarket.

"It seemed like a natural to me," she said. She was hard-pressed to find something wrong with the online-auction system. "I keep thinking and thinking and I can't find it," she said.

### **Need for publicity?**

But Tony Hudson, who put together an online auction for the Arizona Black Film Showcase in March, said publicity is the key to successful fundraising. His auction

received no bids. "Hardly anybody was clicking through" from the film festival's Web site, he said.

Hudson planned to do his own publicity by taking some of the items to a live silent auction during the showcase.

"You really need to let your audience know you're having an online auction," he said.

However, Wilson, the art teacher at Dobson Academy, said it appears that outsiders were able to find the school's Art for the Heart auction. The charity attracted bids from people whose screen names she didn't recognize.

The auction, which closed March 30, made about \$4,015, Wilson said. More than 400 bids were placed and more than 85 percent of the items received bids, she added.

The auction benefits a charity started for a student, Shevy Wright, who died of brain cancer in November. The charity gives to the Chandler Police Department, Phoenix Children's Hospital and the state Make-A-Wish Foundation.

This was the first online auction by the school, which still is evaluating how the auction went. But Wilson said the online auction eliminated some problems with live auctions.

Some previous auctions have been too crowded with items, some of which have gotten overlooked, she explained. At one auction, she said, a certificate for teeth whitening, for example, got lost amid bigger baskets and sports jerseys. That doesn't happen online, she said.

### **No social pressure**

Live auctions also are restricted to those people who show up.

"There's obviously people who cannot attend that event, and there's people who don't live in town that want to help," Wilson said.

Then there are social patterns and behaviors that come with live silent auctions. People get lost in conversation and forget to bid. Or they feel uncomfortable crowding around a bidding sheet.

At the 2007 silent auction, Wilson said, she and another teacher were bidding on a guitar signed by Tempe rock singer Roger Clyne.

"I felt terrible because I beat her, and her husband was all sad," Wilson said. "You get people who bid right at the end. People get mad at those people. That won't happen online."

There was another bidding war for this year's Roger Clyne & the Peacemakers item - a gift basket with CDs and T-shirts. But the bidding took place online at night.

Bidding for a personal chef to go to the winner's home went from \$55 to \$110 in one day, the same price jump as that lunch with Dobson Academy's principal. The price for an

autographed photo of Amaré Stoudemire jumped more than \$200 on the last day of bidding, with the winning bid of \$321 being lodged minutes before the auction closed.

That's because Denise Cusimano, the winner of the item, set her alarm clock so she could get up and get in the final bid. "Get up at 11:45 (p.m.) and wait it out," she said, describing her plan. "11:58, here we come."

Cusimano, a parent of a Dobson Academy child and volunteer coordinator for the school, was also in a fierce bidding battle last year for a signed Stoudemire jersey at a live silent auction.

"I had to hover over the sheet," she said. "Two other people were trying to get it as well." She paid \$600 for that item.

"You get into the groove of things," Cusimano said, "and before you know it, you're in trouble."

Of the two auction methods, Cusimano said she preferred online, even if it meant disrupting her sleep pattern.

"Technology," she said, "it's the way to go."

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