

Education Grants

Alert

The Weekly Report on Funding Opportunities for K-12 Programs

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Try online auctions to save time and up donor participation

Two years ago **Jon Carson** stood at a national schools conference and noted "barely any interest" in his online auction consulting company, **cMarket**.

But the chief executive officer said this January at the same conference, "we had standing room only and that's a real change."

Carson, whose business has helped more than 1,500 organizations raise funds since 2002, said K-12 has become the largest category of online auctioneers. "And they're the most successful by far," he added, "with 50 percent (more success) over arts or healthcare groups."

Variables like geography, volunteer time and lack of women donors have convinced schools to try online bidding as a viable fundraising option. With step-by-step information circulating about how to get one started, now may be a prime time to consider organizing one.

Online auctions can bring in anywhere from \$15,000 to \$20,000 per event on average, Carson said, and some schools that have worked with cMarket have brought in figures in the range of \$60,000 and even \$100,000. cMarket data revealed that K-12 schools experience click-through rates greater than twice what other types of organizations experience.

Online auctions help schools tap into a broader bidding community of grandparents, god parents, and extended family because it's easier for people to participate, Carson said.

The events allow schools to slim down silent auctions, and bring in a selected number of more glamorous items to a traditional event.

Most online events run prior to and in support of live events, and those who've done it that way brought in 30 percent more in the first quarter of 2007 than those running just the online auction, according to cMarket data.

Unlike **eBay** or **Yahoo!** auctions—which Carson compares to setting up a booth in their mall of America—auction consultants help users build Web sites for their events. Schools tap merchants for donations by offering not just a logo etched in a program, but greater marketing value by tracing how many clicks their Web sites get through the auction site.

Campbell Hall Day School in California offered 376 donated items for an online auction last year. Those included a reserved parking spot and an internship with the television series *Boston Legal*. The event expanded alumni participation and brought in \$106,281 from more than 2,200 bids.

Aside from the funds, another plus to online auctions is they "get kids out of public fundraising and going door to door," said Carson, who has served on the boards of the **National PTA** and the **National School Boards Foundation**. "It also doesn't involve confectionary, helpful when thinking about curbing childhood obesity."

Before an auction, schools must consider if their servers can handle high traffic and the fee of a consultant for a step-by-step tutorial in the process. cMarket charges \$295 annually.

With more than 500 school auctions completed, Carson feels "we're seeing signs the market is beginning to move in our direction. Our growth in auctions is huge right now."

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Tips for a more successful Web auction:

- **Set up a homepage**—In cMarket's case, users can work off of a template that requires low technical capability.
- **Spread the word**—Enlist coworkers to help. Define volunteer roles. Request donations of auction items in your e-mails and on the homepage.
- **Build a catalog**—Search for items. Anything made by students will sell, as will gift cards and travel opportunities. Create unique experiences by offering a chance to coach the football team for a day, or be principal for a day.
- **Keep the Web site fresh**—Publish new "Auction News" about bidding. Publicize revenue progress. Have a rotating "featured items" to attract new bidders and attention.