

A Tale of Three Public Broadcasting Fundraisers

How They Found Success Running Online Auctions

In today's challenging funding environment, every station is looking to explore new ways to raise funds and to engage with supporters in a positive way. Online auctions are a fundraising tactic that has proven very successful for a number of stations.

Public broadcasting stations are uniquely positioned for success. They have a devoted and loyal base of supporters who continue to pledge their support throughout the year. They have established relationships with local businesses who are either underwriters or support membership activities. And they have a mouthpiece that allows them to get the word out to promote their auction and drive bidding activity.

From website links to email blasts to on-air mentions, the capacity to bring attention to an auction and invite participation is one of the most important ingredients for success. There are a number of stations around the country that have run online auctions with BiddingForGood, but here are three who have really done it right. Each has their own approach and their own secret sauce. We think there is much to learn from all of them.

WXXI - Rochester, NY



Quick Facts:

- Annual spring auction with BiddingForGood since 2006
- Raised almost \$2,000,000 over the past 8 years
- Most recent auction raised \$225,449 (not including sponsorship)
- Used both staff and volunteer efforts
- Sponsorship raises upwards of \$11,000 each auction

WXXI has used auctions to fundraise for the past 47 years, and have been online since 2000 (and with BiddingForGood since 2006)! While the auctions used to be televised, they have now moved to an online-only format.

The online auction enables WXXI to reach thousands of people that would not otherwise interact with public media in Rochester. The majority of people who participate in WXXI's auction as both bidders and donors are not members of the station. In addition to being a fundraiser, the auction is a vehicle for relationship cultivation. And it enables people who used to live in Rochester (whether former college students or snow birds!) to support their old station.

Because WXXI has been running auctions for the past 47 years, they are seasoned pros at goal setting. Their process involves working backwards from a financial goal to identify an amount based on the percent return on value to drive the acquisition process. They also consider the amount of work required to meet that goal and allocate staff and volunteer support accordingly.

Building relationships with donors and sponsors to help build a catalog

There is a lot of value in running an online auction – donors and sponsors are promoted both online and on-air. Because the auction is online, it can drive business directly to donor and sponsor websites, and include videos, links, and logos. It can also be a great opportunity for a smaller business to contribute because the value of the promotion enables them to make a larger donation.

WXXI has developed relationships with several donors over the course of their auction fundraising, which directly benefits their catalog of items. Every year, WXXI is the recipient of a car, a large inventory of safes, and electric lighting. Because of the long-standing relationships, people come to expect these items will be included in WXXI's catalog.

WXXI also partners with local artists, especially ones with established bases of supporters, who produce custom works of art for the auction. This drives interest because the auction is the only way to get these unique pieces of art. It also helps that WXXI has a relationship with a local printer, who prints lithographs of the artwork, as well as other printing support.

Drive participation through incentives

WXXI focuses on incentivizing participation in the auction in several ways. In exchange for registering to bid in the auction, bidders get two free tickets to a movie theater associated with WXXI. This encourages people to register, drives attendance to the movie theater, and it means that WXXI increases their email database (even if the person never bids).

For the two weeks that the auction is open, WXXI drives traffic to the auction through daily deals. Every day there is a high value item (usually between \$200-\$500 in value), that is only open for 8 hours, and announced on the day. The bidding starts at \$1 and increases in \$1 increments. It piques people's curiosity, keeps the auction top of mind, and gets people to the auction website to click and bid!

Three tips for other public radio stations using online auctions:

- Use the auction as a board engagement opportunity, because you can clearly articulate goals and it helps the board members in terms of their own goals for fundraising or promotion. It can be easy for board members to promote an auction on the intranet of their company and give or identify people to donate. It expands your station's reach and can provide unique experiences and items.
- Focus on experiences rather than stuff in your catalog. Not only can it be easier logistically, but a lot of the bidders are not in an acquisition phase in their lives. They are more interested in buying a gift certificate to a local restaurant or concert tickets.
- Be specific in your item listings – the clearer your listings, the easier it is for people to bid. Think of every question you could have, as well as the questions that you would see on an eBay or Amazon listing and include the answers. Bidders also come from the larger BiddingForGood community, and may bypass the main auction homepage where you have written special instructions.



Quick Facts:

- 3 auctions using BiddingForGood
- Raised more than \$170,000 across the 3 auctions
- Raised approximately \$15,000 with their last auction from the BiddingForGood community
- Drew on staff and volunteer resources
- Seasonal auctions, deliberately staggered from their pledge drives
- Has not used sponsors yet

So far, KPCC has run three online-only auctions with BiddingForGood. By now, they say, “our members and listeners look forward to the auctions and enjoy them – it’s a fun way for them to support their radio station.” While they fundraise through the auctions, one of the major benefits of an auction is that they serve as a valuable member engagement tool. “Auctions give people a special and unique item in exchange for their donation.

They are supporting the programming they love, while also getting something tangible in return.” It is an inclusive form of fundraising that provides another membership benefit and helps people feel more involved in the station, regardless of how much they donate.

It’s all about the items

KPCC has popular talent in the Los Angeles area, and they make the most of their resources by focusing on creating unique experiences. You can get brunch, lunch, dinner, or coffee with different artists or the CEO, go on a running tour with a reporter, or have a popular radio host record your outgoing message. They also made sure to utilize their production staff too, by offering a variety of classes and trainings on software and equipment.

By thinking outside the box and drawing on the things they already have available to them, KPCC has consistently gotten a return on their auctions of 60-80% of value (where most of the time the goal is 50% of catalog value).

The underwriting team has also been instrumental in item procurement – they have started to include it in contract negotiations. Beyond that, KPCC asked leadership circle members, did an outreach mailing, and then pounded the pavement to procure items for their three auctions.

And then promote, promote, promote

Because a lot of their items were experiences with their talent, KPCC had the talent record spots promoting the activities. After their first auction, they also had winners record spots about how much they enjoyed their experiences as a way to increase interest in particular items. They also had general spots promoting the auction that aired.

KPCC sent a postcard to their entire membership base, including lapsed members, as well as email blasts when the auction was coming soon, opened, and within 24 hours of closing. To tie it all together, they promoted specific donations on their social media.

Three tips for other public radio stations using online auctions:

- Make sure to utilize your station's resources! Experiences with their talent make great items. Additionally, those experiences don't usually cost much to procure – just their time, area of expertise (ie. a political reporter giving a behind-the-scenes tour of city hall), and a meal.
- Have a wide variety of items – restaurant gift cards have done really well for KPCC, with the added bonus that they are easy to solicit and send out.
- Promote the auction to businesses as a great way to get visibility. In return for an item donation, the business helps public radio and gets on-air promotion.

Nevada Public Radio - Nevada, AZ



Quick Facts:

- Worked with BiddingForGood since 2006
- Run auctions benefitting Nevada Public Radio as well as joint auctions as Western States Public Radio
- Raised more than \$1,500,000 (not including sponsorship)
- Most recent auction raised \$104,254 plus \$36,500 in sponsorship

Nevada Public Radio (NVPR) has successfully been using online auctions as a fundraising tool since 2006. They currently run two auctions a year, in the seasons they are not running pledge drives. While auctions can sometimes be a lot of work, NVPR says that "listeners love it [the online auctions] and it doesn't feel like traditional fundraising, so you would be leaving money on the table if you didn't try."

Joint auctions with other public radio stations

Some of the most successful auctions Nevada Public Radio has run were joint auctions where they partnered with KNPR, KNAU, KZYX, KPLU, and Capitol Public Radio. The shared audience increased competition between bidders, and the competition increased percent of value achieved and the number of packages available.

Focus on sponsors

Nevada Public Radio focuses on sponsorship for their auctions because "they are the easiest dollars to raise and you don't have to give them an item package in return." In exchange for their sponsorship, NVPR thanks sponsors on air three times a day, and they have prime placement of their logos on their auction homepage.

BiddingForGood's engineering team has worked with NVPR over time to move sponsors logos to the top of their auction homepage to ensure sponsors are getting maximal coverage. NVPR's most recent auction raised \$36,500 in sponsorship from 15 sponsors who contributed donations in increments of \$5,000, \$2,500, and \$1,000.

Putting in legwork pays off in item acquisition

Nevada Public Radio has a robust item acquisition strategy. The development team drives the effort, with help from other departments. It is important not to underestimate the value of pounding the pavement as part of a good item acquisition strategy. Pairing an underwriting account rep and a development associate, they do weekly “walk-arounds” where the pair goes to high traffic areas to introduce themselves to businesses, leave underwriting and auction information, and collect contact information.

Their underwriting team uses the auction as a “door knocker” for prospective clients, since it demonstrates the power and reach of the public radio audience. From asking for auction package donations on air and in their weekly e-news letter, they usually receive 20 or so items. NVPR also asks board members for items and to solicit on their behalf, which is very successful.

Three tips for other public radio stations using online auctions:

- The number one factor that determines the final amount raised is the number of bidders.
- Don't limit yourself in terms of items based on perceptions of the public radio audience. A country music package was Nevada's bestseller overall, but might not be seen as typical of public radio taste.
- You can NEVER have enough dining packages!

Interested to know how this might work for your station? Contact:

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