

betterworld

THE NONPROFIT AUCTION PLAYBOOK

How to plan and run silent, live, online, and hybrid auctions

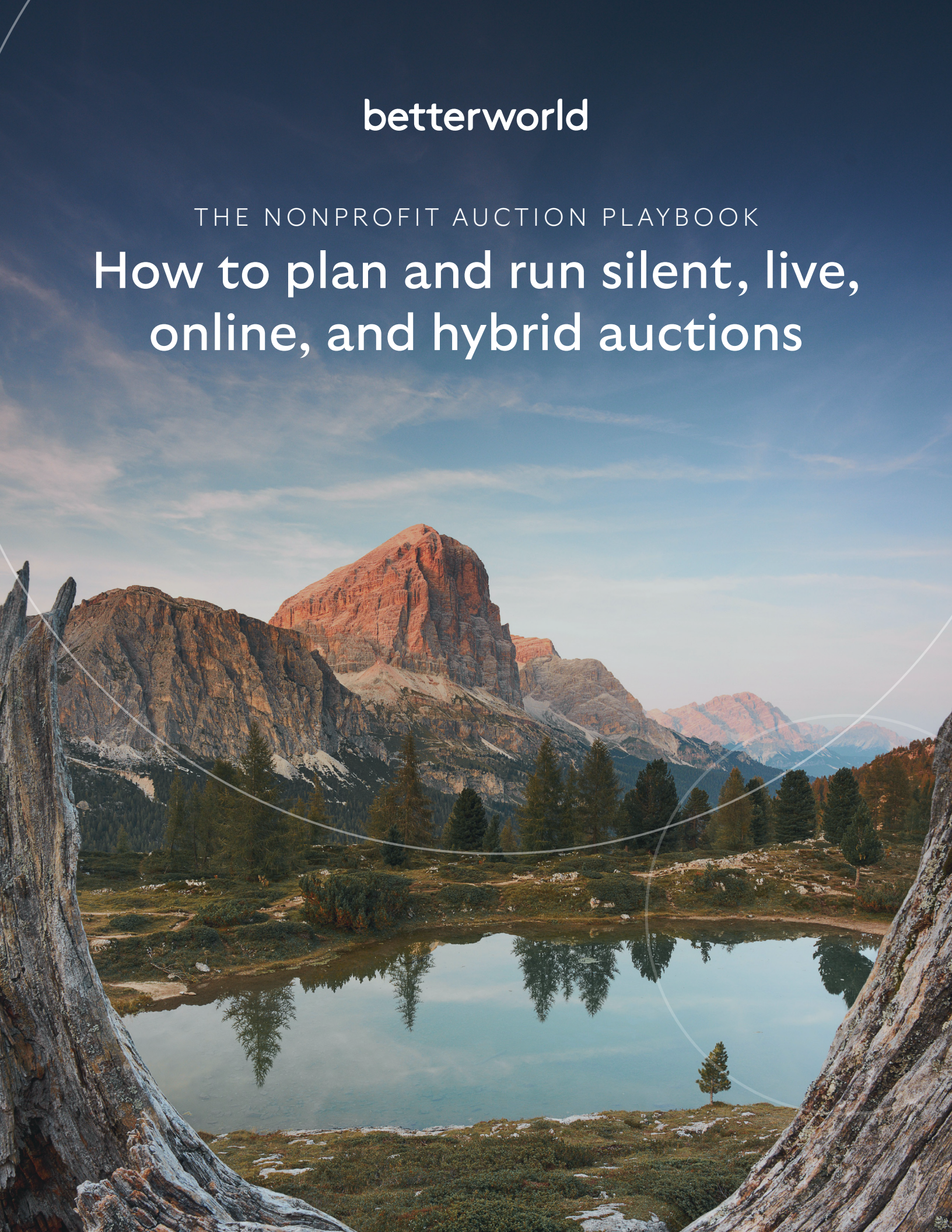


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Introduction.

A profitable auction is built long before the first bid. The format you choose, the items you collect, the prices you set, and the way bidders register and pay all affect the final result.

This playbook shows you how to build an auction that attracts more bids without creating more work for staff and volunteers.

By the end, you will have a clear plan for choosing the right format, setting realistic revenue goals, finding stronger items, running mobile bidding, managing event night, collecting payments, and measuring what worked.

Nonprofit auction.

A nonprofit auction is a fundraising campaign where supporters bid on donated items, services, or experiences. The highest bidder wins, and the proceeds support the nonprofit's mission.

Common formats: Silent · Live · Online · Hybrid

Nonprofit auctions have changed.

Modern nonprofit auctions can begin before the event, reach remote supporters, and combine silent bidding, live bidding, ticket sales, sponsorships, donations, and paddle raises in one campaign.

In fact, mobile auction platforms can deliver roughly 50% higher bidder turnout and 30% higher revenue than paper-based auctions.

Auction software also reduces manual work by bringing bidding, payments, receipts, item tracking, and reporting into one system.

Auction task	Traditional approach	Modern approach	Benefit
Item management	Emails and spreadsheets	Central item dashboard	Less manual entry
Bidding	Paper bid sheets	Mobile and online bidding	More ways to participate
Bidder updates	Verbal announcements	Automatic outbid alerts	More repeat bids
Item browsing	Printed catalog	Digital catalog and QR codes	Faster access
Checkout	Payment lines and invoices	Online payment with cards on file	Shorter waits
Receipts	Sent after the event	Automatic digital receipts	Immediate confirmation
Fulfillment	Manual tracking	Central payment and pickup records	Fewer missed items
Reporting	Multiple spreadsheets	Real-time campaign report	Clearer results

The result is a smoother bidder experience and less work for staff and volunteers.



Chapter 1

Choose the right auction format.

There is no single auction format that works best for every nonprofit. Your decision should depend on four things: your audience, your items, your event setup, and the support available from staff and volunteers.

The four main formats.

Silent auction

Supporters browse several items and place bids at their own pace. Bidding may happen at an event, online, or through mobile devices.

Silent auctions work best when you have many mid-value items and want bidding to run alongside dinner, entertainment, or other activities.

Watch for:

Too many items, low-quality packages, unclear closing times, and slow payment collection.

Live auction

An auctioneer or emcee presents a small number of premium items and encourages guests to bid in real time.

Live auctions work best for exclusive experiences, travel packages, artwork, or other high-value items. They depend heavily on the quality of the items and the person leading the auction.

Watch for:

Poor pacing, weak items, missed winning bids, and long checkout lines.

Online auction

All items and bidding are hosted online, usually for several days. Supporters can join from any location and bid when it suits them.

Online auctions are useful for nonprofits with remote supporters or limited event budgets.

Watch for:

Weak promotion, poor item photos, unclear shipping terms, and low urgency near closing time.

Hybrid auction

A hybrid auction combines online bidding with an in-person event. Bidding can open before the event and continue during the program.

This format offers the widest reach, but it also requires more planning, testing, and event-day support.

Watch for:

Confusing closing times, internet problems, disconnected bidder experiences, and too many moving parts.

Auction format comparison.

Format	Best suited for	Typical items	Main strength	Main challenge
Silent	Galas, schools, and community events	Mid-value goods and experiences	Supports many items	Some items may attract few bids
Live	Major donor events and formal galas	Premium or exclusive packages	Creates urgency	Requires strong hosting
Online	Remote audiences and lower-cost campaigns	Shippable or locally collected items	Expands bidder reach	Requires active promotion
Hybrid	Larger events with local and remote supporters	A mix of silent and premium items	Combines reach and event energy	More complex to manage

A simple way to choose.

Choose a **silent auction** when you have many appealing items and want guests to browse independently.

Go for a **live auction** when you have a few premium items, a strong host, and an engaged in-person audience.

Choose an **online auction** when reaching remote supporters matters more than hosting a physical event.

Choose a **hybrid auction** when you want both event-night excitement and wider participation.

For many nonprofits, the strongest setup is a mix: place most items in a silent auction and reserve a few premium packages for the live program.



Chapter 2

Set your goals, budget, and timeline.

Strong auctions start with three decisions: how much you need to raise, how much you can spend, and how much time your team has to prepare.

Most mid-sized auctions need at least three to six months of planning. Large galas, first-time events, and auctions with major sponsors may need nine to twelve months.

Set a net revenue goal.

Start with the amount your nonprofit wants to keep after all auction expenses.

Net revenue = total revenue – total costs

Your gross target must cover expenses such as the venue, catering, technology, marketing, and purchased items.

Define what success looks like.

Revenue is the main result, but it should not be the only measure.

Track a small set of useful auction metrics:

- Registered and active bidders
- Average bids per item
- Percentage of items sold
- Revenue per attendee
- New donors acquired
- Percentage of winning bids paid
- Staff and volunteer hours

Compare these figures with previous auctions. Low bidder activity may point to weak promotion, poor item selection, or high starting bids.

Build a practical budget.

List every cost before committing to vendors or setting ticket prices.

Common expenses include:

- Venue and catering
- Auctioneer or emcee
- Purchased auction items
- Auction software and payment fees
- Marketing and printing
- Displays, signs, and QR-code cards
- Shipping and item delivery
- Staff or volunteer support
- Photography and entertainment
- A 5% to 10% contingency fund

If projected costs leave too little net revenue, reduce expenses, increase sponsorship goals, or adjust the gross revenue target.

Auction format comparison.

When	Main priorities
6–12 months before	Set goals, choose the format, form the team, select a platform, secure the venue, and begin item and sponsor outreach.
3–5 months before	Confirm premium items, sell sponsorships, build the auction page, book the auctioneer, and prepare the marketing plan.
1–2 months before	Finalize items, write descriptions, set bid amounts, open registration, train volunteers, and test bidding and payments.
Final 2 weeks	Print signs and QR codes, confirm the event schedule, test internet access, review payment settings, and organize item pickup or shipping.
After the auction	Collect unpaid bids, send receipts and thank-you messages, deliver items, review results, and record lessons for the next event.

A shorter auction may compress this schedule, but the order should remain the same. Set the financial plan first, secure strong items early, and leave enough time to test every bidder and payment step.



Chapter 3

Build an auction team without overwhelming volunteers.

A small silent auction may need only a few trained volunteers. A large live or hybrid event may need 10–15 people on site. The goal is not to recruit as many people as possible. It is to give each person a clear role and use technology for routine work.

Core auction roles.

Smaller nonprofits can combine several roles. Larger events may assign one person to each.

Role	Main responsibility
Auction lead	Manages the plan, deadlines, and final decisions
Procurement lead	Secures and tracks donated items
Sponsorship lead	Sells packages and manages sponsor benefits
Marketing lead	Promotes the auction across email, social media, and the website
Technology lead	Manages the platform, bidding rules, and technical support
Volunteer coordinator	Recruits, trains, and schedules volunteers
Finance lead	Tracks payments, refunds, and final revenue
Fulfillment lead	Organizes item pickup, shipping, and delivery
Event-night lead	Coordinates on-site tasks and handles problems
Auctioneer or emcee	Leads the live auction and fundraising appeals

Assign a backup for the auction lead, technology lead, finance lead, and fulfillment lead. These roles should never depend on one person alone.

Let technology handle routine work.

Your auction platform should manage:

- Bidder registration
- Item records
- Mobile bidding
- Outbid alerts
- Winner identification

- Online payments
- Digital receipts
- Campaign reporting
- Pickup and shipping status

This reduces data entry, payment lines, and post-event follow-up.

Let people handle the donor experience.

Staff and volunteers should focus on tasks that need personal attention:

- Securing strong items and sponsors
- Welcoming and helping guests
- Supporting bidders who need assistance
- Sharing the nonprofit's mission
- Building energy during the live program
- Thanking donors, sponsors, and top bidders
- Solving unexpected event-night problems

Pro tip:

Do not add more volunteers to fix a poor process. Simplify registration, bidding, payments, and item tracking first.



Chapter 4

Find auction items people
will bid on.

A strong auction catalog is built around your bidders, not around every donation you can collect. The best items are easy to understand, relevant to your audience, and valuable enough to create competition.

Start with your bidders.

Review what you already know about your audience:

- Which categories performed well in past auctions?
- What are your bidders' interests, ages, locations, and spending levels?
- Which local restaurants, attractions, teams, or businesses do they already support?
- What experiences connect naturally to your mission?

Past auction results are especially useful. Look at winning bids, number of bids, and unsold items to see which categories deserve more or less space in the next catalog.

Build a balanced catalog.

Include a mix of price points and interests so more supporters can participate.

Item category	Examples	Best format
Travel and experiences	Hotel stays, tours, weekend trips	Live or silent
Dining	Restaurant cards, chef dinners, tastings	Silent or live
Sports and entertainment	Tickets, VIP access, memberships	Silent or online
Family and local activities	Camps, museums, attractions	Silent or online
Wellness and services	Spa visits, fitness, photography	Silent
Mission-related experiences	Tours, naming opportunities, program visits	Live or silent
Premium packages	Bundled travel, dining, and exclusive access	Live

Bundle related donations when it increases their appeal. A restaurant certificate, hotel stay, and local activity may attract more bids as a complete weekend package than as three separate items.

Place mid-value items in the silent or online catalog. Remove weak items rather than listing them simply to increase the item count.

Use several procurement sources.

Do not rely on one person or one type of donor. Strong sources include:

- Board members and their professional networks
- Major donors
- Local businesses and corporate partners
- Event vendors
- Restaurants, hotels, artists, and experience providers
- Staff and volunteer contacts
- Existing sponsors

Give each team member a specific outreach list and deadline. Track every request in one place.

BetterWorld's item donation form can add submitted information directly to the auction catalog.

Use several procurement sources.

Every item page should quickly answer three questions:

- What does the winner receive?
- Why is it worth bidding on?
- Are there any restrictions?

Use this simple structure:

Item title: Lead with the main benefit.

Opening: Describe the experience or value in one sentence.

What is included: List the exact products, services, dates, or quantities.

Restrictions: Add expiration dates, blackout dates, age limits, and booking rules.

Redemption: Explain how the winner will collect or use the item.

Fair market value: Display the value clearly.

Use clear photos and avoid vague descriptions. “Private wine tasting” gives bidders little information. “Private tasting for four with five wines and a guided cellar tour” makes the offer easier to value.

Stop collecting items once quality begins to fall. A smaller catalog of relevant, well-presented items can create more competition than a large catalog filled with weak donations.



Chapter 5

Price and package auction items.

Good pricing creates early activity without allowing valuable items to sell too cheaply. Base each decision on fair market value, bidder demand, and past auction results.

Start with fair market value.

Fair market value (FMV) is the normal retail value of an item or package. Record it for every listing and display it clearly.

Use the value provided by the donor when it is reasonable. For donated products or services without a stated value, compare current retail prices.

FMV also matters for tax records. In general, the tax-deductible portion of an auction purchase is limited to the amount paid above the item's FMV. Refer to current tax guidance when preparing receipts.

Set the starting bid and increment.

A practical starting bid is usually **30% to 50% of FMV**. Lower starting bids can attract more bidders, while rare or highly desirable items may justify a higher opening price.

Bid increments commonly fall between **10% and 15% of FMV**. Use simple, rounded amounts that bidders can understand quickly.

Fair market value	Example starting bid	Example increment
\$100	\$30–\$50	\$10–\$15
\$250	\$75–\$125	\$25–\$40
\$500	\$150–\$250	\$50–\$75
\$1,000	\$300–\$500	\$100–\$150

Adjust these figures based on:

- Past winning bids
- Expected demand
- Audience spending levels
- Auction length
- Any direct cost to the nonprofit

Use reserves only when needed.

A reserve is the minimum amount you are willing to accept.

Use one only when selling below a certain price would create a real loss or conflict with donor terms. A high reserve can stop bidding momentum and leave the item unsold.

Use reserves only when needed.

Buy-it-now allows a supporter to purchase an item immediately at a fixed price.

It works best for:

- Multiple identical items
- Popular products with clear value
- Packages likely to attract one decisive buyer
- Items you prefer to sell quickly

Set the price high enough that an immediate sale is worth ending the competition. Do not add buy-it-now to every item.

Auction shortcut:

Use consistent pricing rules across the catalog, then make exceptions only for items with unusual demand, restrictions, or costs.



Chapter 6

Create a smooth mobile bidding experience.

Mobile bidding should feel simple from the first scan to the final payment. Every extra step can reduce participation.

The mobile bidding journey.

- Open:** The bidder scans a QR code or taps an auction link.
- Register:** They enter basic contact and payment details.
- Browse:** They view items, photos, values, and restrictions.
- Bid:** They place a bid or set a maximum bid.
- Respond:** They receive an alert when someone outbids them.
- Pay:** The winning bid is charged after the auction closes.
- Collect:** The winner receives pickup or delivery instructions.
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Remove barriers before bidding begins.

Use a web-based platform that works without an app download. Keep registration short and allow bidders to save a card for faster checkout.

Before the event:

- Test the auction on several phones and browsers
- Confirm that pages load quickly
- Provide reliable venue Wi-Fi and a backup hotspot
- Post simple bidding instructions
- Train volunteers to help guests
- Test every payment and receipt step

BetterWorld allows supporters to access an auction through a link or QR code and bid from a mobile browser.

Place QR codes where bidders need them.

Use QR codes to remove the need to type long web addresses.

Place them:

- At check-in
- On item displays
- On tables and programs
- Near the stage and bar
- On event screens
- In emails and social posts

A general QR code can open the full catalog. Item-specific codes can take bidders directly to a listing.

Use maximum bidding.

Maximum bidding allows supporters to enter the highest amount they are willing to pay. The system increases their bid only when needed and stops at their chosen limit.

This helps remote bidders and guests who do not want to keep checking their phones throughout the event.

Bring bidders back.

Automatic alerts should direct supporters straight back to the item page when they are outbid.

Useful messages include:

- Immediate outbid alerts
- Reminders about items with few or no bids
- Final-hour notices
- Closing-time countdowns
- Winner and payment notifications
- Keep messages brief and include a direct bidding link.

BetterWorld's popcorn bidding feature can extend the closing time when a bid arrives near the deadline. This gives other bidders time to respond and reduces disputes.

Pro tip:

Test the full bidder journey before launch. Register, bid, get outbid, win, pay, and open the receipt exactly as a donor would.



Chapter 7

Promote the auction.

Auction promotion should begin once the catalog and key items are ready. Build interest before bidding opens, then increase reminders as closing time approaches.

Build your bidder list.

Promote the auction beyond event ticket holders. Include:

- Past bidders and attendees
- Major and recurring donors
- Board members and volunteers
- Sponsors and their employees
- Remote supporters
- Staff, families, and community partners

Segment your messages when useful. Past bidders may respond to new item previews, while remote supporters need a clear invitation to participate online.

Follow a simple promotion schedule.

Timing	Main message	Call to action
4–6 weeks before	Save the date and introduce the mission	Register or mark the date
1–2 weeks before	Preview top items and explain how bidding works	Pre-register
Auction launch	Announce that bidding is open	Start bidding
During bidding	Feature popular items, new listings, and low-bid opportunities	View items and bid
Final day	Send clear countdown reminders	Bid before closing

Use email, social media, text messages, and partner networks. Every message should include a direct auction link or QR code.

Promote items, not only the event.

Specific items give people a reason to open the catalog.

Feature:

- Premium live-auction packages
- Popular local experiences
- Items with broad appeal
- New additions
- Items with few bids
- Packages nearing closing time

Use one clear photo, a short description, the main benefit, and a direct bidding link.

Help partners spread the word.

Give sponsors, board members, and volunteers a small sharing kit containing:

- A short email message
- Two or three social posts
- Auction images
- The bidding link and QR code
- Suggested posting dates

Ready-to-use materials make it easier for partners to reach people outside your contact list.

Keep the mission visible.

Connect auction revenue to a clear outcome.

Add a short mission line to item pages and promotional messages, such as:

Every winning bid helps provide after-school programs for local students.

Keep the item's fair market value separate from the charitable message. Bidders should understand both what they are buying and how the proceeds support your work.

Auction shortcut:

Concentrate most of your promotion around auction launch and the final 24 hours. These are the moments when clear, direct reminders matter most.



Chapter 8

Run the auction on event night.

Event night should move through five clear stages: check-in, bidding, live program, auction close, and checkout. Assign one event-night lead to manage timing and solve problems.

Test before guests arrive.

Complete one final test of:

- Wi-Fi and backup internet
- Check-in devices and guest lists
- Auction links and QR codes
- Bidding and closing times
- Payment processing
- Event screens and microphones
- Staff logins and permissions

Place a test bid and payment from a guest device. Fix any issue before doors open.

Make check-in fast.

Use ticket scanning or name search instead of printed lists whenever possible.

At check-in:

- Confirm the guest's registration
- Collect payment details when needed
- Assign their table or paddle number
- Share the auction link or QR code
- Direct technical questions to the support desk

Keep a short paper guest list as a backup.

Explain bidding once.

The emcee should give a brief explanation covering:

- How to open the auction
- How to place or increase a bid
- How maximum bidding works
- When silent bidding closes
- How winners will pay and collect items
- Where bidders can get help

Display the QR code and closing time on event screens throughout the evening.

Manage bidding in real time.

While bidding is open, the team should:

- Help guests who have trouble bidding
- Monitor activity and payment issues
- Highlight strong items with few bids
- Announce closing reminders
- Confirm that bidding closes correctly

For live-auction items, record the winning paddle and amount immediately. Repeat the paddle number aloud before moving to the next item.



Chapter 9

Add revenue beyond winning bids.

Auction revenue can come from several sources, including guests who never win an item.

Revenue source	How it adds revenue	Best timing
Ticket sales	Admission, tables, or VIP upgrades	Before the event
Sponsorships	Business support in return for recognition	Before the event
Silent and live auctions	Competitive bidding on donated items	Before and during the event
Paddle raise	Direct gifts at set giving levels	During the program
Impact giving	Fixed gifts tied to a specific need	Throughout the campaign
Buy-it-now	Immediate purchase at a fixed price	Before or during bidding
Direct donations	Gifts made without bidding	Before, during, and after

[Raffles](#), games, and ready-made experience packages can also add revenue, but only when they fit your audience, budget, and local legal requirements.

BetterWorld can manage bidding, tickets, sponsorships, paddle raises, fixed-price items, and donations in one campaign.



Chapter 10

Close bidding, collect payments, and fulfill items.

Once bidding ends, the process should move quickly: confirm winners, collect payment, send receipts, and release or ship items.

Prepare checkout in advance.

Decide these details before bidding opens:

Checkout decision	What to confirm
Payment methods	Cards, checks, cash, or digital payments
Cards on file	Whether bidders must save a card before bidding
Failed payments	Who follows up and how quickly
Receipts	Whether they are sent automatically
Item pickup	Where and when winners collect items
Shipping	Who pays and how items are tracked
Unclaimed items	The deadline and next steps

Cards on file and digital checkout can reduce payment lines and prevent unpaid winning bids. BetterWorld can charge saved payment methods and send receipts after the auction closes.

Handle unpaid bids quickly.

If a payment fails:

- Send an automatic payment reminder.
- Follow up personally within 24 hours.
- Give the winner a clear payment deadline.
- Offer the item to the next bidder if your auction terms allow it.
- Update the final revenue report if the sale is canceled.

Combine all purchases into one invoice when a bidder wins several items.

Include clear receipt details.

Receipts should show:

- The item purchased
- The amount paid
- Its stated fair market value
- Any portion that may qualify as a charitable contribution
- The nonprofit's contact and tax information

In general, only the amount paid above fair market value may be tax-deductible. Tax rules and disclosure requirements can vary, so confirm current requirements with a qualified tax professional.

Pro tip:

Treat payment and fulfillment as part of the event plan, not post-event cleanup. Clear policies and automated checkout prevent most follow-up problems.



Chapter 11

Measure auction performance.

Do not judge the auction by gross revenue alone. Review how much the event kept, how bidders participated, and how much work it required.

Start with the financial results. Record gross revenue, total expenses, and net revenue. Compare these figures with your original goals and previous auctions.

Next, review bidder activity. Look at:

- Number of registered and active bidders
- Percentage of items sold
- Average winning bid compared with fair market value
- Revenue per attendee
- Number of first-time donors

Then identify which items attracted the most bids, sold for the strongest prices, or received no interest. Use these results to improve future procurement, pricing, and item descriptions.

Finally, review operations. Record payment problems, technology issues, volunteer bottlenecks, and tasks that took too much time.

End the post-event review with three questions:

- What worked well?
- What should improve?
- What should change next year?

Save these notes with your auction records so the next event starts with clear lessons instead of starting from scratch.

Your next auction can work even better.

A modern auction should not depend on separate spreadsheets, paper bid sheets, payment lines, and days of follow-up.

[BetterWorld](#) brings item collection, [ticketing](#), registration, mobile bidding, live auction support, paddle raises, payments, receipts, fulfillment, and reporting into one connected platform.

Your team spends less time managing the auction and more time engaging donors.

Find out the real cost of your fundraising platform.

Platform fees are only part of the picture. Hidden costs, lost revenue, and donor churn can also affect how much reaches your mission.

Tell us about your organization to see what your current fundraising platform may really be costing you.

[Calculate your platform cost](#)

See the full process in action.

Take a guided look at how BetterWorld supports your auction from item collection through final fulfillment.

[Request a demo](#)