

GOING, GOING, GONE

THE ART OF OUTCRY SALES

Text by **KRISTIN ARMSTRONG**

Jim Miller, a St. Joseph native now residing in Chicago, found a niche a decade ago running fundraising auction events for non-profits. From schools to hospitals to arts and cultural organizations, Miller helps charitable groups gather items that will wow the guests, and drive an exciting bidding. We recently caught up with Miller between events, and asked him about his increasingly competitive business and how to organize a successful charity auction.

LAKE: How did you get started conducting auctions for non-profits?

Jim Miller: I did my first auction about 10 years ago for a small school in Michigan. I had a ball doing the event and made enough of an impression that I began getting invitations from other non-profits to run their fundraising auctions. Over the years I saw a niche available for someone to work specifically with charities on their fundraising auctions. In this business, most auctioneers have a staff working 200 days a year doing antiques and estate auctions—they do charity stuff on the side. But my sole focus is offering a specialized auction approach to best serve non-profits.

LAKE: You do more than just conducting the auction itself at an event—tell us how you work with non-profits while planning a charity auction.

JM: If I'm asked to work an established auction, my first goal is an honest evaluation of what they are already doing. I start by asking why they are looking



Photo by WALLACE CHROUCH

for a new auctioneer. I audit the whole event up front—fix the bad, keep the good. The majority of the auctions at which I work are put together by volunteers, and more often than not, these folks don't have any training or experience in presenting an auction. They get a file folder from last year's chairperson and are then directed to "make it bigger, better and increase profits by 15 percent." I believe the most valuable thing I bring to the table is experience. Having seen many an auction go horribly wrong, I help groups navigate the gauntlet of donor relations, item acquisition and event planning. There are some really good road maps out there for putting on a solid auction. I'm a big believer in taking that map and customizing it to fit each particular event.

LAKE: Charities have been doing auctions—both silent and live—as fundraisers for quite a while. How do people keep auctions fresh?

JM: The truth is, many don't and they just fade away after a few years. That is one of the biggest challenges

(opposite page) Jim Miller at Detroit's Woodward Dream Cruise.
 (below) Some auctions feature only a handful of big items or several smaller items, such as at this garden party for the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center in Detroit.



Photo by JOHN MARTIN

my clients face. I stress that they need to build an event into something special. Make it a must-attend event each year. Assuming the organization doesn't have a built-in audience, like a school, they will always face great competition for every dollar they raise. Keeping it fresh means understanding the dynamics of an auction. Let's say you have 30 items in your live auction and 400 people in the crowd. That means 370 non-winning bidders. My goal is to make the evening fun for everyone at an auction—to make sure every guest feels it was worth the price of admission. Because if they do enjoy themselves, even if they don't spend a bunch of money this year, odds are good they will spend it if you can keep them coming back. But if you fail to entertain your guests, you will struggle the next year. I also believe in good scheduling and having great auction items. Both are key to any auction's success.

LAKE: What's the most unusual or exciting auction you've been involved with?

JM: It's usually the "items" that fall into those

categories. My favorite items have been "A Fishing Charter with a Priest," "Name Your Own City Street," "Lunch on the Coast" (from Chicago, on a Gulfstream Jet, to San Francisco for dinner and coffee); a tray of VERY GOOD biscotti has been known to bring over \$1,000 at an auction each year. Recently, the Chicagoland Cancer Information Coalition was the beneficiary of an auction I did with NBC's Katie

DeGeneres Show and some movie premiere passes. We raised over \$40,000 in 10 minutes. That was a pretty fun day at work for me. Having Katie onstage doesn't hurt either!

LAKE: Give us some tips for creating a really terrific auction.

JM: (1) Be creative with your donors. When soliciting auction items from businesses or people, be prepared with ideas for best featuring their donation. Sell your potential donor on a concept rather than just "please give us some of your stuff to sell." They hear that 20 times a week.

(2) Spread the burden. Make sure you don't just get bids from the big hitters. Offer some smaller items in a silent auction or a raffle.

It's important to find a way for every person to donate at their comfort level. Don't leave \$50 on the table just because you forgot to ask for it during the evening. ■

Jim Miller is the owner and auctioneer for Miller Auction Services, www.charityauctioneer.com.

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Couric. It was also the shortest auction I've ever done. Only two items. The first was a trip to New York that included tickets to the *Today* show, *Saturday Night Live* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. The other was a similar deal, but this time to the West Coast with tickets to *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Ellen*