Raise Money Now with a Virtual Live Auction

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About this Edition

This is the second edition of this guide. We're releasing it on July 22nd. We expect to publish additional updates throughout the year as we collect more feedback from customers and fellow industry pros. You can sign up to be alerted whenever we release a new version, at:

http://www.schoolauction.net/resources/school-auction-guide/
online-auctions-with-a-virtual-live-auction/

Introduction

If you are involved in the nonprofit and school fundraising world, we don't have to tell you these are challenging and uncertain times. Many nonprofits and schools have canceled their upcoming events due to the COVID-19 crisis. Others are postponing, still hoping to host an in-person gala event a few months from now. If you've already completed procurement for a gala auction, you may feel you have nothing to lose by delaying.

The truth is none of us can predict whether organizations will be able to hold in-person events two months or even six months out. The end of physical distancing won't happen all at once. It's likely to happen region by region over time. Subsequent Stay at Home orders are highly probable.

Squeezing postponed galas into a tight time frame this fall will make for a live auction traffic jam. Organizations will be battling each other for ticket sales, sponsorships and precious donor contributions. And there's no guarantee that these events won't need to be postponed again and again during the next year.

All of this means it's time to develop a back-up plan. Rather than cancel or postpone, your organization can pivot to a Virtual “Live” Auction, and raise money now.
Yes, You Can Still Fundraise

Many businesses and individuals are taking a financial hit as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, and some organizations fear they won’t be able to raise money in the current climate. But nonprofits are taking a hit too--and at a time when they need funds more than ever. The services nonprofits provide are in higher demand in this economic downturn. If giving declines, some nonprofits are likely to go under.

Nonprofits are employers, too. In fact, they employ more than 10% of the country's workforce. Saving these jobs and protecting the services these employees provide is critical to the economic health of the nation.

We encourage you to reach out to your donor base--but do it sensitively. This doesn't mean reminding them of the difficult time they are facing right now. It does mean reworking the traditional procurement approach. Now is the time to edit your procurement letter to make it really stand out. You are competing for increasingly limited donor contributions, so your ask must tell your story in an attention-getting, inspiring way.

Tell your supporters how your organization is being affected by the crisis, and what you need to fulfill your mission. Schools need technology (laptops, tablets, etc) so their students can learn online when necessary, and they need funds to train teachers to provide this online curriculum. Churches and other nonprofits need funds to ramp up their benevolent, community-based work, which is needed now more than ever.

Make sure your supporters--item donors, sponsors, and potential bidders--really understand your mission. Transparency about how much funding you need to meet your goals is key. Any time you can be specific, you should be:

• $X buys tablets for 10 students
• $Y buys 2 weeks of food for 2 shelter pets
• $Z stocks our community food pantry for 1 week

Individual giving tends to rise after major events. Now is the time to reach out directly to individual donors. Make a personal ask. Connect one-on-one. A lot of people are working alone at home right now, and many will appreciate the sense of connection a phone call brings. Use this time to pick up the phone and call your potential donors and make stronger connections. Tell them you are still raising money and why, and tell them exactly how they can help. Kristin Smith of Event Savvy suggests, “Remember to ask how they
are doing and how this has affected them personally and professionally. This is the time to make those genuine connections.” If they can’t give now, they may be able to down the road.

**Fundraising Options**

The nonprofit gala back-up plan can include a number of different options:

- Online giving campaigns
- Peer-to-peer giving
- Direct solicitation
- Online Silent Auctions
- Virtual Live Auctions

Most nonprofits already understand how to implement the first four, and have probably been doing them for a while. But Virtual Live Auctions are a new animal. One that we’re all figuring out as we go.

This Guide sets out current best practices for running a Virtual Live Auction. We’ll be updating it as we learn more by doing more.

**Virtual Live Auctions**

A Virtual Live Auction is not an Online Silent Auction, though that can and should be a big part of any nonprofit’s fundraising plan.

In addition to having an online auction that lasts a set amount of time, you can also produce a **Virtual Live Auction**—a webcast of your auctioneer and emcee selling live auction items in real time, while bidders at home watch the stream and place bids through fundraising auction software.

Gala fundraising auctions are philanthropy as a spectator sport--bids go higher because there is a crowd cheering on the bidders (especially in the live auction), because there is head-to-head competition within a short time frame, and because the guests at your event are feeling relaxed and happy about celebrating your organization. At many of these events, alcoholic beverages are served to guests. This tends to help guests make impulse bids on that class project, signed basketball, or bottle of rare Pinot Noir.
Traditional online auctions have a very different feel for bidders. It’s easy for them to get distracted away from the auction; it’s NOT a very social event, and the bidders are as likely to be drinking a Diet Dr Pepper as a microbrewed beer.

So the question becomes: how can you emulate the best elements of a live event online? Doing that starts with the help of a seasoned auctioneer, enthusiastic emcee, AV professionals, a quality fundraising auction software package, and a well-written and executed program.

The auctioneer and emcee are filmed at a broadcast studio or event space with reliable, tested, high-speed internet service, in real time. (With the proper technology, which many auctioneers have, the broadcast can even be filmed from multiple locations, if people are quarantined.) The AV experts provide professional sound and lighting, and produce the broadcast, making sure that transitions from one broadcast element to the next take place smoothly.

**What it Looks Like**

A Virtual Live Auction offers a condensed, webcast version of a live gala auction. It differs from a live gala event in that it features only a handful of select items and starts with a paddle raise (aka special appeal) up front. Viewers bid from home using fundraising auction software.

Plus and Premium subscribers of SchoolAuction.net and Tofino Auctions now have the ability to broadcast their livestream, display their items, and accept bids all on a single screen.

If you’re not a SchoolAuction.net or Tofino Auctions customer, ask your fundraising software provider how they recommend handling this. In some cases, bidders use two screens: one window or device shows the real-time webcast of the event. The other window or device shows the auction software, where bidders can place their bids.

In a typical live gala, there are 8–10 bids per item, and a professional auctioneer sells each item in 2–2.5 minutes. But in a virtual live auction latency (the delay inherent in any broadcast) can increase the sale time per item by up to 3 times that. Bidders don’t experience this *latency*—they see and hear the auctioneer and emcee in what to them feels like real time, and they can see right away if they are the high bidder or they’ve been outbid. But the auctioneer does experience latency, and must be prepared to fill
this time with meaningful content. (If you're using SchoolAuction.net/Tofino Auction's single-screen virtual live auction feature, latency can be as low as just a few seconds, depending on how you broadcast your livestream.)

While a virtual live event can’t replicate the exact community experience of a live in-person gala, in these times, it’s the next best thing. And the next best thing doesn’t necessarily mean less money. Misty Marquam of Marquam Auction Agency notes, “Our current data shows nearly all our virtual events are netting over goal.”

A virtual live event allows you to cast a wider fundraising net. You can encourage your supporters to invite friends and extended family to participate—particularly in the special appeal portion of the event. And it can provide a chance for your community to come together in the safest way possible right now—online—to support a common cause.

How to Make it Happen

The Where: Location, Location, Location

Location is challenging these days. Ideally, your virtual live event will be produced and broadcast from a production studio space, using professional sound, lighting, and camera equipment, and tried and tested high-speed internet service.

When evaluating studio space, make sure there’s enough room for the people involved to be six feet apart. If you plan to have an auctioneer and an emcee working together, they’ll need a stage where they can stand six feet apart. (Mark their spots with tape, to reassure viewers that everyone is following safe distancing guidelines.) The camera person must be able to do their work at least 6 feet away. The sound technician is typically in a booth, so their physical distance is easy to manage.

If you’re a school with an excellent AV department, you may be able to make use of space at your facility and tap into the expertise of the AV instructor and students.

If a studio isn’t a possibility, you can have an AV team come to you at another location, but bear in mind this means they’ll need to bring lights, cameras, sound equipment, etc, and that you’ll need to test your on-site internet connectivity to make sure you have the capacity to stream your event live from your chosen location.
The Who: A Qualified Team

Like gala auctions, virtual live auctions are collaborative efforts. In addition to your usual auction committee, you’ll need to fill the following roles:

Professional Benefit Auctioneer

We do mean a professional. This is no time to skimp and rely on a volunteer, regardless of their talents and good intentions. You need someone who can create a live auction vibe (or something really close to it) in an online gathering where folks can’t see and talk to one another. A seasoned auctioneer understands the psychology of giving and can influence bidder behavior. The auctioneer is the public face of your virtual event. They provide the juice that powers the bidding.

If you have an auctioneer you traditionally use, talk to them about their experience with virtual live auctions, and make sure they are skilled in the format. All live auctioneering involves a degree of performing. But virtual events demand even more of this skill. There’s no live audience for the auctioneer to feed off of, so their enthusiasm, energy, and the fun they project onstage must come from within. It can be a challenge for even a seasoned professional.

Remember, bidders are easily distracted. We’ve all been conditioned to have an extremely low tolerance for boredom online. As soon as people lose interest, they’ll click away to something else. A professional auctioneer can keep your bidders engaged longer, and the longer they watch, the more money you’ll raise.

Finally, you want to do everything you can to avoid a potentially disastrous viral moment. What happens online can stay online for a very long time. An amateur auctioneer who flubs spectacularly isn’t the first result you want popping up when people search for your organization online.

Emcee

Your auctioneer can recommend professional emcees, who have tremendous experience hosting benefits. Ask for recommendations of emcees they’ve enjoyed working with in the past.

An emcee introduces your event, your auctioneer, and helps talk up items. They serve as the “mission ambassador” for your organization during your live event. Which means they need a thorough understanding of your
mission and fundraising goals. They and the auctioneer must communicate ahead of time and assess their chemistry, because they’ll need to have a great on-stage rapport.

Another option is to use a virtual emcee to describe each of your items in 1-2 minute videos. Extra points if you can include item photos in the background and provide details not available in the written description.

Having a live emcee gives your virtual event a lot more oomph. There are two real, live people for the camera to focus on, rather than just one. This takes some of the performance pressure off the auctioneer. It also allows the camera to cut back and forth between the auctioneer and emcee, which can help maintain viewer interest.

**Professional Production Assistant**
Your auctioneer is going to be juggling a lot during your virtual live auction. They’ll be monitoring the bidding and the live stream, and referring to their own notes/script. So dedicate a seasoned event professional to assist with monitoring the bidding. This person should be extremely familiar with your bidding software. They can keep tabs on the paddle raise totals and the bidding status of items and feed information to the auctioneer.

**Bid Tracking Assistant**
Choose a member of your auction planning team—someone very familiar with the software—to assist with bid tracking. This person will select items to display for bidding and manually close items when the auctioneer signals that it's time.

**Professional AV Production Team**
Excellent sound and video quality are key to a successful virtual live auction. Again, bidders will click away if the feed is difficult to see or hear, or if the webstream appears glitchy. So, unless you’re a school with a really stellar cadre of AV students and an in-school studio space, investing in a professional AV production team is well worth the cost.

A professional AV team knows how to support your auctioneer and make their job easier with properly placed monitors, and the right lighting, microphone and camera equipment. They offer reliable and strong internet connectivity, so that your webcast transmits smoothly to your audience. And they can seamlessly add pre-recorded video to your livestream and display
item photos and bidding instructions at appropriate times.

They also have the expertise to broadcast picture-in-picture screens, apply motion graphics, and they can switch camera angles periodically to add visual interest to your feed. As Brian Lehmann of The AV Department notes, this “live switching makes your virtual live auction feel like a television broadcast.” Which is essentially what it is.

If you have a sound and lighting team you’ve worked with on past galas, ask them if they’ve produced virtual auction livestreams before. (If not, proceed with caution: you only get one shot at your live webcast, so go with experience.) What lessons have they learned that you can apply to your event? Can their studio accommodate your physical distancing requirements? Ask them for examples of their work so you can get a sense of the production value of their streams. Does their service come with a Director and Production Manager?

**Videographer(s)**

Short videos can enhance your virtual event. A brief welcome from the CEO, Principal, or Head of School can set the tone for the event. Another video can instruct bidders on how to use the bidding software. You may also want to introduce your Paddle Raise and certain items with brief video clips.

If one of your supporters has video production experience, see if they’ll volunteer to produce some short video clips for your auction. And if you can’t find a supporter with experience, talk to your AV team or auctioneer about whether they can provide this service.

Last, but certainly not least, these days almost everyone has the ability to film short videos on their phones. Once you’ve captured your video clips, send them to your AV team for incorporation into your webcast.

The more clips you have, the better. They give your virtual live auction team the ability to cut away from the auctioneer and emcee—breaks that allow them to take a breath, or to gather the latest bidding update or paddle raise tally.

**Help Line Monitor**

Dedicate a staff member or volunteer who understands the bidding process, your fundraising auction software, and how to troubleshoot login problems,
to answer a Help Line phone number. Publish the number in your Pre-Game video, and scroll it across the bottom of your screen during bidding. If you’re using SchoolAuction.net or Tofino Auction’s Virtual Live Auction feature, a Need Help? link will automatically display on viewers’ screens.

Chat Monitor
The chat is automatically enabled for SchoolAuction.net and Tofino Auctions virtual events. You’ll want a dedicated staff person or volunteer to monitor it. This person should thoroughly understand the bidding software and how to place and check bids, so that they can answer any bidding questions that appear in the chat.

They’ll also serve as a cheerleader for your bidders, encouraging them to bid higher and congratulating winners. Throughout the event, they can reiterate instructions from your auctioneer, stress selling points for your items, and remind people of the current ask.

Your chat monitor should also have some pre-scripted messages on hand that they can use to generate interest just before and during the event. “Super excited to see how much we can raise tonight for GREAT CAUSE!!!” “What are you planning to bid on tonight?” etc.

Virtual event chats offer a great way for folks viewing from home to connect with one another. Your chat gives your virtual event a more social aspect. Appointing a social butterfly to be your chat monitor helps make your chat—and thus your event—vibrant and fun.

Social Media Guru
If your organization already has a strong media presence, now is the time to amp it up even more. If you’re not utilizing social media, this is the time to start. Really drive home your mission and the work you’re doing to achieve it. Talk about your upcoming fundraiser and how folks can contribute. Use social media to seed enthusiasm for your upcoming event and your organization as a whole. Post the signup link for your event and pin it to the top of your feed. Social Media is the best platform to reach your donor base right now. Use it!

Professional Event Planner(s)
any gaps you have in your team. From pre-event production planning to Think of professional event planners as the utility players on your team. They can be used to fill a number of different support staff needs. Their assistance
can be invaluable in pulling off a Virtual event. These professionals already know how to pivot and make a successful auction happen, use them to fill any gaps you have in your team. From pre-event production planning to managing the run-of-show event night, they have the experience to handle all of your event needs.

**Live Musician**
This is, of course, a completely optional role to fill. But consider how much depth and interest live music could add to your webcast. Some piano as the Thank You video is running, interspersed with the auctioneer and emcee banter, or to introduce and close out your event can add to the viewer experience.

If you plan to use live music, you’ll most likely pre-record it. This takes an extra body out of the studio during your broadcast. Make sure your musician understands exactly what type of music you want them to provide.

**A note of caution:** be careful about using music you pull off the internet or from other streaming sources. Many virtual live events are streamed on platforms like YouTube or Vimeo. Bots “patrol” these platforms looking for the use of unlicensed musical content. They’ll kill your virtual event instantly if they find it in your livestream.

**The How: Quality Bidding Software**
If you already have a fundraising software package that you like, that’s great. Contact them about how you can use it as part of a virtual live event, and then skip ahead to the next section: Before the Show.

If you’re using SchoolAuction.net or Tofino Auctions software, you’ll want to read the rest of this section.

Plus and Premium subscribers can use our new Virtual Live Auction feature to run a one-screen livestream plus bidding event.

**Enter Your Items**
You’ll add items to your catalog just as you always have. Assign them the appropriate item types and set them for bidding via paper or virtual. Upload at least one appealing image for each of your items and write up a catchy item description.

If you know of additional information that would be helpful to your
auctioneer, such as whether the item can be double-sold, enter that in the Internal Notes tab on the item entry/edit screen.

If you plan to offer online silent auction bidding on some items and then finish with bidding at your virtual auction, you can bulk edit those items to Bidding Style = Online to Virtual Event or Online Pre-event/Paper Bid Sheets at Event.

And of course, you can run a typical online silent auction leading up to or following your Virtual Auction. Just make sure you set the bidding style for your online-only items to Online/Mobile Bidding.

Pro-Tip: If you know in advance that an item can be double-sold, clone it and set the cloned version not to display in your catalog. Then you can easily sell the second item at the end of your event.

Set Up Your Special Appeal / Paddle Raise

Add a new cash donation item to offer during your virtual live auction. Starting fresh means that the names of people who have donated to your existing item won’t display—you’ll have a clean slate for your virtual special appeal. Repeat donors to the same paddle raise item will see messaging that they’ve already donated. They’ll be able to donate again, but creating a fresh paddle raise means they’re less likely to be dissuaded from donating twice.

Set Up Your Virtual Feature

Go to Admin > Site Settings > Virtual Event and complete the set up steps:

Enable Virtual Event Setup and Management
This turns on your virtual auction settings. Clicking this box automatically converts your Gala (paper/paddle bidding) items to Virtual Auction items. Unchecking the box automatically converts them back to paper/paddle bidding items.

Enter Your Virtual Event Date and Time
Virtual events require significantly more server capacity than regular online bidding does. Entering your date and time allows us to appropriately schedule and balance that load, so that your event transmits smoothly. We understand that events run over schedule, and your event will be able continue past its scheduled end time without any setting adjustments on your part.

Create Help Banner
Enter a phone number that people can call if they are having trouble gaining access to your event. Your Help Line monitor should understand how to send invitations from your site. They should also be aware of the most common solutions to offer in the rare cases when viewers are blocked from accessing your livestream.
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Select the Bidding Style for Your Virtual Auction

- Single bids via amount entry. This setting is intended for auctioneer-led virtual auctions. This option allows your auctioneer to establish the bidding levels, but, as at an in-person gala, people can enter a bid at a different level if they choose. If you are not using an auctioneer to facilitate bidding on your items, you should choose one of the other options.
- Single bids via quick bid buttons. The next three minimum raise intervals display for bidders to click.
- Max bids via amount entry. Bidders set a max bid and forget about it. The software bids for them up their max.

Set up your Progress Tracker (Optional)
The progress tracker can track all event revenue, revenue from only your virtual event, or revenue from only virtual event cash donations. If you plan to use it, be sure to set a goal for your event. Setting a goal helps give the tracker appropriate scale. The goal will not place a ceiling on donations--your site will continue accepting funds after your goal is met.

Prepare Your Invitation
Set an expiration date for your virtual event invitation, and edit your Invitation to Virtual Event email template (go to Admin > Site Settings > Communications > Email Templates). The email template can be sent as is, but, if desired, you can add additional information about your organization, your cause, and your specific event.

Customize Your Welcome Text
This text will appear on your Online Auction, Virtual Event, and Voting Contest landing pages. Think about which of these features will be live during your virtual event, and compose your welcome text accordingly. If you’re running an online auction prior to your virtual event, you may want to edit this text at the close of your online auction.

Invite Your Supporters to Attend
Check your site for duplicate users at Admin > Manage Users to make sure your invited bidders can log in. Merge any duplicate users.

If you haven’t already, edit your Invitation to Virtual Event at Admin > Site Settings > Communications > Email Templates. The invitation can be sent exactly as it is. Changes are not necessary, but you may wish to customize your email to share inspiring information about your event and your cause, and to specify the date and time of your event.
Invite your supporters to bid. Each recipient’s invitation includes a personalized link that takes them straight to your event welcome page. If they haven’t already been bidding on your site (in an online silent auction, for example), they’ll select their online handle. If you are requesting or requiring credit card vaulting for your event, this is where they’ll vault a card. If text notifications are enabled on your site, this is also where they will opt in or opt out of receiving texts about your event.

Give Non-Invitees Access to Your Event
If you want to make sure non-invited visitors to your site can view your livestream event, or you intend to publish a general link to your event on social media or your organization’s website, make sure the Sign Up feature is enabled.

Get to Know Your Virtual Event Control Panel
Your Virtual Event Control Panel is the place where you will:
• Turn your virtual event on and off
• Control which virtual item is currently available for bidding
• See how many viewers your event has (bear in mind a single screen may have more than one viewer)
• Monitor bidding on your virtual items and paddle raise
• Award items to their winners
• Monitor your chat
• View your total funds raised
• Enable the shopping cart icon for your viewers
• Set up and broadcast your video livestream

Only users with chair roles on your site can view the Virtual Control Panel. Make sure everyone on your virtual event team—your auctioneer, your AV tech, your bidding monitor, your production assistant, your chat monitor—has been invited to assume a chair role on your site and understands how to use the panel for their specific event-night tasks.

There are two ways to access your control panel:
• Go to Auction Night > Virtual Control Panel
• Go to Admin > Site Settings > Virtual Event and click on the Virtual Control Panel link

To see what Guests see during your live event, click the Guest View button at the bottom of the Virtual Control Panel. To return to the control panel, click the Virtual Control Panel link in your site header.
Give Non-Invitees Access to Your Event

Turn on your Virtual Event by toggling the Start/Stop Event switch at the bottom of the control panel screen.

Toggling the switch to Start does not start your broadcast. Turning on your event simply allows people who have signed up or received invitations to your event to see the guest screen. If you haven’t started broadcasting your video feed yet, the video box on their screen will contain this message: “Stream will start playing automatically when it is live.”

Once you’ve turned on your event, any item you’ve set to display for virtual bidding will be visible to your guests and they’ll be able to place bids on it. They’ll also be able to enter messages in the chat feature. So if you’ve turned on your feature before your event goes live, you may wish to have someone monitor the chat occasionally.

When your event is turned on, logged in guests will see a green banner at the top of any public page reading “Click Here to Join the Virtual Event.” This allows your guests to easily navigate to your livestream from anywhere else on your site.

Once they do, the goal is to keep them there—you want your virtual event attendees to actually attend your virtual event, not get distracted by other areas of your site. For this reason, viewers of your virtual event will see only limited navigation options in the site header of the virtual event guest screen. So it’s a good idea to wait until just before your virtual event starts to turn it on.

Choose Your Livestream Service

In an ideal world, your livestream will be produced and managed by a professional AV technician. However, if you have someone on your staff with experience producing and broadcasting video content, and they easily understand these instructions, you can run your livestream in-house. If you use an in-house livestream tech, this person should not be tasked with any other responsibilities during your event.

The video production for your livestream can be an elaborate, multi-camera/location setup, or as simple as one person sitting in front of a webcam. It’s up to you to decide what you want and need and to produce the video content/livestream outside of the software.
Take latency into account when choosing how you’ll set up your livestream. Latency is the amount of time that elapses between when something is recorded and when your viewers see it. The following livestream options are presented in order from least to most latency:

**Built-In Streaming Via Single Webcam**
The virtual live auction feature is designed to allow you to film and stream a live feed directly from a single webcam. This is the lowest latency option, with extremely low latency (less than one second) for direct, unedited video feeds. This is also the simplest, lowest-tech option.

**Streaming Via External Service: Multiple and Pre-recorded Video Feeds**
If you want to include pre-recorded videos, static images, overlays and/or video feeds from more than one location/webcam, you’ll need to use additional tools (or the services of a video professional) to manage the various elements within your livestream. Latency is typically +1-5 seconds, depending on the level of processing and the tools/settings used.

Recommended tools are available at various price points, and include:

- Manycam
- Streamyard (paid version only)
- OBS
- Vmix

See more details about how these tools work with the software here. Regardless of the tools used, your video content needs to be formatted using the web-standard RTMP protocol.

If you’re working with a professional AV technician, they may have their own service preferences. Be sure to test out the service you intend to use ahead of time to make sure the latency is acceptable and that you understand its features and how to use it.

If no one on your team has experience or expertise with video production, you should consider hiring a video studio or professional. Video production for live streaming can be complex, especially since additional “processing” creates additional latency. The difference between amateur and professional video production for livestream may be most noticeable in realized (vs. anticipated) latency level.

**Embedded Video Feed**
You also have the option of playing the livestream from an embedded source (YouTube Live, Facebook Live, Vimeo, or Twitch). The latency for these options will be similar to the source’s platform (typically 10–60 seconds).

Make sure you’re using the platform’s livestream option, rather than its regular video recording option. The embed codes often look similar (and will work in the player) but they operate differently. Livestreams show the same live content to all viewers at the same time. Videos, on the other hand, begin playing when each viewer arrives on the page, and viewers can pause, restart and skip around using the player controls.
Link to Your Livestream

In an ideal world, your livestream will be produced and managed by a professional AV technician. However, if you have someone on your staff with experience producing and broadcasting video content, and they easily understand the instructions, you can run your livestream in-house. If you use an in-house livestream tech, this person should not be tasked with any other responsibilities during your event.

When you’re ready to link to your livestream:
• Click the Set Up Video button at the bottom of your Virtual Event Control Panel.
• Choose the streaming service type you plan to use from the dropdown menu.
• Follow the instructions on the screen to begin broadcasting your video.

Pro Tips
• To minimize latency on direct video feeds, you’ll want to make sure you’re recording from a well-powered computer with high-speed, reliable connectivity.
• To prevent feedback from multiple mics: all other computers/devices in the webcast room must be muted or used exclusively with headphones. Make sure your software is not open in multiple tabs, and that no audio is playing in the background.
• Make sure your equipment configuration works.
• If possible, conduct a dress rehearsal at least a day before your event. Test lighting, audio, connectivity, video feed and all communications/instructions you’ll be sending to your supporters.

Monitor Your Chat

Designate a team member to be your chat cheerleader. Ideally, this person knows your community well and will recognize many of your bidders and chatters. They should understand the bidding process so that they can quickly answer bidding-related questions. And they should not be double-tasked with managing your item carousel or your livestream video.

The chat feature is easy-to-use and allows your at-home viewers to connect with one another during your event. For most organizations, the chat is proving to be quite popular and active. In addition to viewer comments, all bids and cash donations are automatically called out in your chat.

Your chat cheerleader can and should reiterate your auctioneer’s instructions, remind bidders of the current ask, answer bidder questions, congratulate high bidders and encourage more bidding.
They’ll monitor the chat from the Virtual Live Event Control panel, where they’ll have the ability to delete the rare inappropriate chat.

Your chat is live the moment you toggle the switch to Start your virtual event. If you’ve turned on the feature days prior to your actual event, you’ll want to check regularly to see whether anyone has posted in the chat. There may be questions there for your team to answer.

**Make Items and Paddle Raises Available for Bidding**

Just as in an in-person auction, only one item or paddle raise/special appeal will be visible and available for bidding at a time.

The item carousel on your Virtual Event Control Panel shows you which items have already been sold, which item is currently being sold, and which items are coming up. The person managing your item carousel (ideally your bid monitor) will select which item displays for your guests and when. Due to latency, this person should be listening to your livestream on a headset—not hearing the auctioneer live in the room—so that they can switch items in conjunction with the auctioneer’s presentation.

Prior to your event, make sure your items are in the order you wish to sell them. (You can make changes at any time, even on the fly during your event, but why not set them up ahead of time in the order you expect to offer them?) Click Manage Items on your Virtual Control Panel, and use the drag/drop feature to order your items and paddle raise. Review the order with your auctioneer. For virtual events, we recommend you put your paddle raise first and run that before selling items.

**Launch and Monitor Paddle Raise/Special Appeal**

Hold your paddle raise before you start selling your virtual items. You’ll have the highest viewership at the beginning of your livestream program. Take advantage of that and capture as many donations as possible, right off the bat.

When it’s time for your paddle raise/special appeal, your bid tracking assistant/monitor should position that item to display for your viewers. During the introduction, we suggest setting the donation Amount to Offer to “None.” This will keep your viewers focused on your special appeal intro, rather than on any early donations.
At the close of the intro, your auctioneer will announce the first donation level (this is typically the highest suggested level), and your bid tracking assistant/monitor should set Amount to Offer to reflect that level. Viewers will only be allowed to give at the set level until it is changed. Your auctioneer and bid monitor will see donations appear in real time in the Current Item box, allowing your auctioneer to call out donors, see how many donations have come in at that level, and get a sense of when it’s time to shift down to the next level.

Donations are called out in the chat, and each donor name briefly “floats” upward on the livestream screen.

Due to latency, the person setting your special appeal Amount to Offer should monitor donations by listening to your livestream via headset, NOT by listening to your auctioneer live. When listening to the livestream via headset, your monitor hears the paddle raise change called at the same time as your viewers, which allows them to switch to the next level at the right moment.

Once all levels have been offered, set the Amount to Offer to All, in order to capture any last-minute or custom donations.

If you’re not conducting a stepped paddle raise (where one donation level is available at a time), you can set your Amount to Offer level to All right at the start of your paddle raise, and people will be able to give any amount they choose.

**Pro Tip:** Line up large gifts before your event. Talk to potential big givers and ask them to pre-commit to giving at the top amounts you’re asking. Make sure they understand how and when to enter their cash donation during your virtual event and/or enter it ahead of time for them, so it’s already listed in your site.

**Monitor Bidding/Award Items**
Your Auctioneer, production assistant and bid tracking assistant will track bidding right on your Virtual Event Control Panel. Bids appear in the Current Item box in real time, as they are placed. This allows your auctioneer to call out the current bid and advance the ask.

Your auctioneer will be able to view your item description and photos in the Current Item box. They’ll also be able to see any internal notes (not visible to bidders), such as whether the item can be double-sold, what it sold for last year, etc.
Your bid monitor will manage your Item Carousel to display the appropriate item at the appropriate time and award items to their winners. Do not ask your auctioneer to do this—they have enough on their hands already. As noted before, your bid monitor must listen to your livestream via headset, so that they hear the item closing called at the same time bidders do. At that moment, they can click the Award Winner button to award the item to its high bidder.

Note that the item will remain open until the Award Winner button is clicked.

**Offer One Last Chance to Give**
Once your items have all been awarded, return your Paddle Raise/Special Appeal item to the current item position and set Amount to Offer to All. This allows your viewers one more opportunity to support your organization with a cash donation.

**Collect Payment**
At the close of your virtual event, turn on Add Cart on your Virtual Control Panel. Have your auctioneer or emcee announce that viewers can now review and pay for their purchases by clicking on the cart icon in their site header. Your chat monitor should also announce this in your chat feature.

If you wish to wait to collect payment, that’s fine, too. Plus Subscribers can **send an invitation to self check-out from the Orders page.**

Premium subscribers can **bulk process vaulted cards.** They can also **send an invitation to check-out from the Mobile Dashboard.**

**Before The Show**

**Curate Your Items**
A gala auction often has as many as 15 live items, including a paddle raise or special appeal. But a gala auction also has a room full of people talking to each other, watching the show together and feeding off not just the energy generated by the auctioneer and emcee, but the energy generated by the crowd. In order to sustain and benefit from even close to that level of bidding energy, your virtual live event needs to be quick and short—probably no more than half an hour from when the bidding starts until your grand finale. Every minute past the half hour mark, regardless of the quality of your webcast, may see a dramatic drop off in potential bidders.
So curate a limited slate of 4 to 5 live auction items, tops. If you have a traditional live item that sells well and appeals to a broad swath of your demographic, such as that prime parking place near the front of the building, be sure to include it.

Local travel packages and experiences still sell well and make excellent virtual live auction items. They offer great visuals, and your auctioneer and emcee will find them easier to riff about than something static. As soon as restrictions lift, people will be yearning to travel. But ask the donor or consignment vendor for an extended window on package component expirations, if possible. One consignment vendor we know well is offering 5-year windows (the norm is 1 year) to use their packages right now.

**Recruit Sponsors**

Just because you’re not holding a gala doesn’t mean you shouldn’t solicit sponsorships. Focus on providing sponsors recognition rather than event tickets. And let them sponsor expenses related directly to producing your event: professional videography, live music, even your paddle raise can be sponsored. Be sure to provide recognition for these sponsors in your bidding software and in the thank-you video that you run during the pre-game portion of your event.

**Promote Your Event**

There’s no point in hosting a virtual event if no one knows about it. Just as you’ve always promoted your in-person gala, you need to promote your virtual live auction. In fact, you probably need to do more promotion. Your in-person gala has likely become a traditional event that your staunch supporters add to their calendars every year. People who would never miss your in-person event may need some extra encouragement to attend your virtual event.

At SchoolAuction.net and Tofino Auctions, we’re seeing two trends:

- Far fewer people attend virtual events than attend gala events by the same organization.
- The people who do attend are more likely to be active bidders and donors.

This means you really need to recruit your MVBs (most valuable bidders) to attend your virtual event. Extend a direct, personal invitation by phone or text or email to the people who you know will help make your event special and lucrative.
Use your social media accounts to tout your virtual live items, your mission, and your fundraising goals. Pin your Save the Date notice to the top of your feeds. Send Save the Date notices to all of your supporters. If you’re a SchoolAuction.net or Tofino Auctions customer, be sure to make good use of the invitation system to bring supporters to your event.

**Produce Videos**

If you’re using the Streaming via External Service video option, you may wish to include pre-recorded video clips. Brief, entertaining video clips can add interest to your virtual event and keep your viewers engaged. Pre-recorded video possibilities include:

- Your pre-game video scroll (more on this below)
- A welcome message
- Sign up and bidding instructions, with screenshots of the bidding software views
- An intro to your paddle raise
- Thank you to sponsors
- Thank you to your event committee members
- Teasers or intros for your Live items
- Brief musical performances
- Organization beneficiaries thanking your audience for their support

**Script the Event**

You can’t afford to wing it during your virtual live event. A detailed script is essential to the success of your event. And as Misty Marquam notes, scripting is “not for the novice.” In order to be prepared for the latency effect, your auctioneer and team need to script out:

- All cues for the AV team to run video or switch backgrounds.
- Welcome and Introductions of the auctioneer and emcee.
- Numerous ways to talk about the mission of your organization. Your auctioneer and emcee should know your mission backwards and forwards and be able to tell your story in multiple ways.
- Auctioneer/Emcee banter to get the show started and to introduce each item.
- How to sign up to bid, how to place a bid, how to make a paddle raise donation. Your auctioneer and emcee should understand exactly what button bidders need to push and when.
- Paddle raise introduction and how supporters can donate.
- Introduction to each item, riffs on item selling points, how to bid on each item.
• Transitions that bridge the viewer from what they just saw (say, bidding on Item 1) to what they’ll see next (a brief video describing Item 2, for instance). Every transition should be planned and scripted to keep viewers on track and fully engaged in what they’re seeing on screen.

• Closing the Auction: final thank yous, tally of funds raised, grand finale.

**Run Of Show**

A couple of weeks before your event your principal team members, including your auctioneer, emcee and AV technicians need to intentionally craft what’s called a run-of-show.

The run-of-show takes everyone through the draft script, beat by beat. This is an opportunity for your team to identify and brainstorm solutions to possible problems, refine verbiage, add creative flair to your event, and clarify any points of confusion.

Most importantly: your run-of-show makes sure everyone is on the same page regarding the plan for how your event will be executed. It explicitly spells out not just what people will say and when, but what people will do and when: with action cues for your AV team and your auctioneer and emcee.

**Show Time! The Event Itself**

**Pre-game Video Scroll**

Don’t wait until your official starting time to thank sponsors and committee members and let people know how to sign up to bid. You want to save all of your valuable live-stream time for what really matters: raising money.

About 30–45 minutes before your event starts, begin rolling your pre-game video. This is a looping video that should include thank-yous to sponsors, committee members and volunteers. It can include inspirational photos of the population you serve and the work your organization does. You can also include photos of your live items and reminders of the virtual live auction starting time. And, most importantly and repeatedly, your pre-game video should tell people how to bid on items.

Of course your auctioneer will re-iterate your bidding instructions during your live event, but it’s always a good idea to give people a head start.

**Welcome Message**

Ideally, this is a BRIEF and focused message. It can come from your principal or head of school, from your development director, or from a student or
recipient of your services. It should be short and inspirational. The goal is not
to run through a list of thank you’s to the parties involved. (Your pre-game
video just did this and you can do it again at the close of your Virtual Live
Auction.) You don’t want to lose people right off the bat. You want to thank
them for tuning in, fire them up for your cause, and get them excited to bid.
All in three minutes or less, please.

**Introductions of the Auctioneer and Emcee**
The auctioneer and emcee introduce themselves and welcome everyone to
the event. Theirs are likely the first live faces your bidders will see. They’ll
establish their rapport and get everyone revved up and ready to raise money,
starting with a Special Appeal. They’ll want to chat for several minutes in
order to give viewers time to sign up to bid.

**Paddle Raise/Special Appeal**
This is the highest value portion of a gala event. Because viewership tends
to fall off as the virtual event proceeds, doing the Paddle Raise up front is
essential. That’s when most bidders are watching. Keep the intro—whether
pre-recorded or live—brief and inspirational.

As usual your organization should prep pre-committed large donors to give
early and make sure they understand how to make their donation. If they
can’t tune in to make their donation in person, you can pre-load them into
your bidding software.

At the conclusion of your paddle raise, let your viewers know how much
they’ve raised. Make the announcement a celebratory moment.

**Bidding**
At last! The moment everyone has been waiting for: a chance to bid on your
exciting and well-curated live items!

Your auctioneer should take a minute or two to:
- Remind people to get ready to bid and tell them how
- Let people know how to get assistance if they’re having trouble signing up
to bid
- Explain the latency effect and how it makes your virtual live auction
different than a “regular” live auction
- Explain how they will be announcing item closings
- Encourage people not to delay bidding
This last point is especially critical. A virtual live auction isn't like a regular live auction, where a bidder can swoop in at the last minute with a high bid and win. In a virtual event, you snooze, you lose. In many cases, the webcast your bidders are watching is actually being filmed 5–40 seconds before they actually see it, so the auctioneer may be closing an item sooner than bidders anticipate. Make sure your bidders understand they need to get their bids in early so they don’t miss out.

**Wrap Up and Grand Finale**

This is the moment to thank your sponsors--ideally, in a creative and fun way. While the thank you video is running, the production or bid tracking assistant can tally the funds raised during the evening. This is the result of everyone’s hard work and generosity, so announcing your total raised should be done with tremendous celebratory spirit.

And don’t forget to tell people how they can pay for their items and donations. Provide payment instructions in your livestream as well as your chat.

Finally, why not cap off the event with something fun and lighthearted? Cut away to a community member dancing or performing your school fight song, or video or still shots of your supporters wearing funny hats or all raising a toast.

**After the Curtain Falls**

You did it! And while you definitely deserve to rest on your laurels, there are a few more tasks to take care of before you’re completely finished.

**Gratitude**

Thank everyone. Your item donors, your sponsors, your auction committee, your board, your staff, your great professional auction team. Let them all know how much you raised and that you couldn’t have done without their generous assistance.

Put a note on your website encouraging your community to support your local item donors and give them specific ideas about how. For instance: “The following restaurants offer curbside take-out and gave generously to our auction. Take a break from cooking and order out tonight!”
Officially Notify Winners and Collect Payments
You’ve probably already done this using your auction software, but if not, don’t delay. And if you have, check to see if some orders remain unpaid. You’ll want to charge vaulted credit cards and send folks who haven’t paid a new invitation to self check-out.

Debrief
It may be tempting to put this off, but memory is a fickle thing. You won’t regret scheduling a virtual debrief session with your team for the week after your event when the details are still fresh in your mind.

• Discuss what worked well and what didn’t.
• Which items sold better than expected? Make a note and plan to reach out to those donors again.
• What changes might translate well to a gala event?

We will return to those someday!

But until that day comes, you can bring your community “together” and raise lots of money for your organization by pivoting to a Virtual Live Auction.
About Us

This whitepaper is a collaboration between 4 companies—we all have a LOT of experience helping nonprofits plan, manage, and run fundraising auctions. We invite you to use the links below to find out more.

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