



Auction Results

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Bidding by Keypad

Hand-held devices revolutionize silent auctions

BY **SANDRA GUY** Sun-Times Columnist

Next time you attend a silent auction, prepare to text or key in your bid, thanks to emerging technology that Chicagoans will be among the first to see.

"A hand-held bidding device frees people from standing around tables and writing down bids on clipboard paper," said David Goodman, president and founder of Chicago-based Auction Results, and a professional fundraising auctioneer. "People can bid from anywhere in the room."



David Goodman, president and founder of Chicago-based Auction Results, uses magic illusions to get the most from auctions. He has raised more than \$100 million for charities in the last 20 years. He is pictured auctioning off a golf package at the Latin School in February.

(Scott Stewart/Sun-Times)

The latest product to be introduced at auction and other events this fall is the IML Connector, a handheld device the size of a Blackberry with a QWERTY keyboard, a color screen, high-resolution graphics and the ability to run Flash movies and sponsorship logos. The keypad will include push-to-talk and simultaneous interpretation abilities, with a built-in microphone and speaker so that people asking questions can be more easily heard.

"It's creating advanced audience response," said Melanie Burns, director of business development for the East Coast division of IML, a 10-year-old British company whose silent-auction software and equipment Goodman recommends and uses in conjunction with his "live" auction techniques.

The Connector also will alter a portion of IML's business model, since IML will rent the devices to auction sponsors to run themselves. Until now, IML charged rental fees for voting devices that its representatives monitor.

IML, which employs software developers overseas and in the United States to write software unique to each event, started by developing a keypad that instantly counted audience votes at corporate events and presentations. The company started developing silent-auction software and hardware after the Prince's Trust, one of Prince Charles' charities, asked it to come up with a way to enhance security by keeping people in their seats instead of roaming around the room.

The resulting keypads create a bidding "frenzy" similar to the last 15 minutes of a live auction by allowing votes to be projected on a large screen so bidders can see who is the top bidder, how much he or she is bidding, and how much time is left to bid.

"The process taps into people's competitive nature," Burns said. "The mindset changes from 'How much can I afford?' to 'I've got to get it. I just want to win.'"

Another company, Auction & Event Solutions, based in Denver but which recently opened a Chicago office, develops software that enables bidders to bid on touchscreen computers, and speeds up the processes of giving people bidding numbers, collecting information about bidders, and printing bid receipts.

"Two to three people often gather around one of the computers, which function like kiosks, and people start talking. People start touching the pictures on the screen (or using a stylus) and browsing through categories of bid items. It's very simple to use," said Jon Doehling, the company's owner. The result is a fun experience, more time for bidding and higher bids. The industry standard calls for silent auctions to raise 30 percent of a fundraising event's total, while the live auction usually accounts for the remaining 70 percent.

Goodman said the express-pay software is especially important at high-end charity events, since bidders who have spent "\$10,000 or \$15,000 or \$60,000 on individual items don't want to wait in line at the end of the night to get their card swiped and get an invoice."

Amy Rosenow, chief operating officer at Chicago hedge fund Sheffield Asset Management, has run auctions for the past three years for the Midwest chapter of Hedge Funds Care (HedgeFundsCare.org), an industry group that raises millions to combat child abuse and neglect.

Rosenow has seen firsthand the power of combining silent-auction technology with Goodman's live-auction expertise.

Hedge Fund Cares set up touchscreen computers throughout its fundraising venue last year and displayed key donors' names, auction-item photos and explanations of bid rules on minimum reserves and bidding increments. During the silent auction, the group arranged to show in real time bid updates, as well as items with the most bids and those with no bids.

The charity discovered that the technology helped get people in the mindset of competitive giving. The charity responded by offering little extras in its bid items, such as a visit from the chef or a walkthrough with the sommelier along with dinner at an upscale restaurant.

Rosenow was also impressed by the use of bid texting and projections of real-time, on-screen bids that competing groups punched into hand-held devices at the Robin Hood Foundation fundraiser in New York, a celebrity-studded luxury auction that raises money to fight poverty.

"The technologies are getting more user-friendly, and I'd be shocked if they didn't become the norm within the next three to five years," she said.

Goodman said he has worked at events in which bidders show up to bid on a single item that they had spotted on a charity's Web site or learned about via Facebook or Twitter chatter.

Even the tablet computers common in specialized events are becoming mainstream now that Apple has introduced the iPad. Companies ranging from Dell to Lenovo to Notion Ink are starting to produce multimedia tablet computers, said Jeff Orr, senior analyst for mobile devices at ABI Research. The number of these media tablets to be shipped in the first half of this year is expected to reach 4 million -- a far cry from 100,000 in the same period last year.

Goodman, whose North Shore family ran a retail liquidation business, discovered that he would rather focus on raising money for hospitals, museums, schools and other worthy causes rather than selling off goods left over from bankruptcies, divorces and business failures. He isn't shy about saying he has raised more than \$100 million for charities in the past 20 years.

"I realized that, if non-profits would apply a bit of psychology, strategy and business planning to their charity auctions, I could significantly impact the return on the night of the event," said Goodman, who went to auction school in Missouri.

No one will give away Goodman's auction secrets, but they do reveal that he does magic tricks and uses old-fashioned charm, entertainment and crowd knowledge to get bidders to aim high.

At a recent Saturday night auction in the Latin School's auditorium, Goodman raised more than \$350,000 in less than 15 minutes!