



Speed the Light Pie and Silent Auction: A How-To

Introduction:

How did a simple baseball become a nationally recognized symbol for Speed the Light? Why would a boy give up a Nolan Ryan keepsake for missions? Perhaps you've heard the story about a young boy named Marc who gave his signed baseball to be auctioned off for missions. A baseball he loved turned into \$6,000 that could change other's lives. His story turned into hundreds of thousands of dollars when it was told by former STL director David Raley around the world. In the same way, what began 15 years ago as a pie auction has turned into a significant opportunity for our congregation to give to missions.

The Vision:

For the past 15 years, our church has held an annual auction to raise money for Speed the Light. Originally, the congregation was asked to bake a pie, bring it to the auction, buy it, and then share it with everyone! In our first auction, we raised about \$1,000. That was in 1992. In 2006, we were able to raise over \$33,000 in one evening.

Each year we communicate the importance of Speed the Light to our students and adults on a regular basis. Missions is a priority in our church. We challenge our students to make this auction a success by asking for items to sell, inviting family and friends, and serving the people during the auction.

The number one reason I believe this auction has been a success is consistency. Our church had the same youth pastor for 11 years. When we became the youth pastors, we had already been a part of the church and have continued to maintain the auction. There have now been traditions established that our congregation looks forward to. For example, each year, one man donates a large jar of homemade strawberry jam. It became known that this was Pastor Shawn's favorite (the previous youth pastor). Each year now, a bidding war ensues to drive up the price to a ridiculous amount. (It sold for \$2,500 last year!)

An additional reason this auction has become successful is the involvement of the community. After attending a Rotary auction and an Amish auction (yes, we have Amish communities in Montana), we realized that local businesses would donate items as advertising. One year, a man donated so many new items to the auction, that we started a silent auction in addition to the live pie auction. Now, we have three separate silent auctions taking place while we are auctioning off pies and bigger ticket items. We have sold everything from handmade log furniture to custom built golf carts; we even sold a donkey!

The Process:

Our annual auction takes place in early October. We begin asking businesses and those in our congregation for donations in August. We begin asking our congregation several weeks in advance to bake items. We advertise on Christian radio and encourage people to invite friends. We now have so many items to sell, that we actually need more buyers! We also have an annual pie contest at our Labor Day picnic. We encourage the winners to bake their winning pies and we make a big deal about them at the auction.



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The day of the auction (which takes place on a Sunday), we invite a special speaker to share about STL and missions. We have had missionaries, the national STL director, and other directors come and speak on Sunday morning. We also show the new STL theme video in that service. We ask everyone in our congregation to participate, even if they can't buy anything. There is plenty of pie and food to go around and the atmosphere is exciting and fun to be a part of.

As you begin to collect donations, it is important that you set some guidelines. For example, we take only new items unless they are collectors' items. We have auctioned off antique guns (allowed in Montana), collectible books, and rare artwork. However, we will not accept used items unless we believe they are in excellent condition and will actually sell for a decent price. It has taken some practice to establish a system that works and how to price items we receive. Some people come to the auction hoping to get a good deal on goods or services, and this occasionally happens. Others are willing to pay more than retail value because they believe in missions. We typically set the minimum price for items at 25% of retail value and then limit bidding to certain increments. For example, if a manicure/pedicure gift certificate is valued at \$60 retail, we set the minimum bid at \$15 and the bid increment at \$5. Don't neglect small items either. Children love to buy something for themselves, so we accept donations such as candy and toys that may only sell for a few dollars. In 2007, we had a specific room for a kids' auction.

We also sell small kids' pies for a dollar and other baked goods that children can buy. Last year we offered face painting and temporary tattoos. This includes the children and teaches them to give to missions as well. You may want to include your children's pastor and allow them to raise money for BGMC if you don't have enough students to do both.

The actual expenses of the auction are fairly minimal. Paper goods, coffee, lemonade, decorations, advertising, and a rental fee are a small expense considering the amount we raise. We have had to rent the elementary school gym for the past six years to accommodate the size of the auction, but many churches will already have a space large enough for this event.

Should you decide to hold an auction of your own, there are several people you will need to have involved in order for it to succeed. First, your senior pastor. Be sure to share with him or her your vision for Speed the Light and how this auction will benefit the church as a whole. (Some of our people save all year for this event). Second, your church bookkeeper or accountant needs to be included. It is possible that this event alone could require a week of bookkeeping. Donor letters must be sent, checks deposited, and contributions recorded. You also need several adult volunteers invested in this process. Typically, they collect donated items, oversee different areas of the auction, and help with follow-up. Finally, you need to involve your students. They must first have a heart for the lost and a willingness to help with the auction.

The Event:

On Sunday afternoon, we begin setting up. For us, this is an all-day event. We move in a sound system, tables, and decorations. We hang up past STL banners, decorate the tables with the current year's theme "locker posters" (they look like placemats), and set up a registration and cashier's table. (The banners and posters are available from the Gospel Publishing House). We have a board with



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each bidder number written on it where we post the items they purchase for an easier check-out process. We set up the silent auction with items displayed, bid sheets, and pencils. We also provide each person with a list of items available for auction. (This list isn't usually complete because, no matter how many times you ask, you will still get items donated the day of the auction.) Students are assigned certain jobs for the evening. For example, we have drink servers, table bussers, pie runners, and spotters. Some students help with the silent auction while others empty garbage cans. We have dishwashers so that people can take home clean pie plates. Everyone can be involved somehow.

The logistics of the auction have taken us years to streamline. We now have a registration process as people enter and receive a bid number, a full crew of students and adults to log all donations, two cashiers, and several auctioneers. One year, an Amish auctioneer came and auctioned off a handmade Amish quilt! Typically, my husband and I auction off most of the items, but you could use anyone who has positive relationships with your people. It is extremely important that all donations are clearly registered and valued so that businesses and individuals receive proper tax credit for their donations.

The silent auction is divided into three time slots. A certain number of items are available for bidding until certain times. Each section closes at a different time. This allows the cashiers time to log who has purchased what and allows people to bid on other items if they don't win something. Every item and pie is given a distinct item number and a card on which we write the winning bidder number and the price they paid. These cards are then hung on the bidder board. Buyers are encouraged to track their own purchases as well on the back of their bidding card. We encourage buyers to pay for their purchases that evening. If you have a large number of people you don't know who are attending, you should require that they pay before taking their items home.

Follow-up:

After the auction, we send thank-you cards to everyone who baked a pie or other food item. We send each donor a letter thanking them for their contribution. We also list each business that donated an item on a bulletin insert for our congregation. Finally, we share with the students and the congregation the amount raised and how it will benefit a missionary. For example, when we raised \$33,000 we were able to share that our auction would purchase a vehicle for a missionary family.

Your bookkeeper will need to calculate contribution amounts for the people in your congregation and include those on year-end giving statements. Make sure you do some research on IRS requirements. For example, if someone buys an item for \$75 that typically retails for \$50, they only receive tax credit for \$25 (the difference).

Closing Thoughts:

It may seem like an impossible task to wait 15 years to see this type of success; however, I would encourage you to not give up. In 2002, we saw an increase from about \$8,000 to \$23,000! The success of this event is dependent mainly upon consistency, preparation, and a bit of entrepreneurial spirit. Many people are afraid to ask businesses for donations because they believe they won't donate to a church. However, most of our donations come through personal contact with the owners or those who are self-employed. The people in your congregation do business every day with potential donors.



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Encourage them to simply ask. The worst thing that can happen is that someone says no.

With any fund-raiser, a key ingredient is prayer. Ask God to give you creative ideas for advertising and for obtaining donations. Ask your people to pray about what God would have them spend. Many people come with a budget and purchase items they would normally buy anyway, but now the church is receiving the income. For example, a local coffee shop donates coffee and a mug, something someone would typically purchase. This is better than trying to sell them something they don't want, such as more pizza kits or cookie dough.

Our heart has always been to see missionaries equipped with what they need. We didn't set out to have a nationally recognized pie auction, but we desperately wanted to raise more money for missions. We still encourage our students to give sacrificially as well, but it is clear that this auction has exceeded what we could have done on our own. If you decide you want to attempt this fund-raiser, I would encourage you to attend a few auctions in your area. You can usually find some type of auction, even if it isn't a fund-raiser. There are auction houses that sell cars and equipment, art, and estate furniture. Go, and observe their process to get ideas. (We got our idea for a peg board with bid numbers from the Amish!)

I believe that this fund-raising auction can be duplicated in any community or church. With some small modifications and the establishment of your own traditions, you will be surprised at your own success!

Remember, every dollar you raise makes a difference.

Nadine Ross

