GalaBid

FREE AUCTION PLANNING TOOLKIT

Fundraising Auction Terms, Made Practical

Understand the auction terms that matter and the decisions behind them. Compare formats, set starting bids and increments, plan your items, approach donors with confidence, choose the right software, and keep the essentials close with a one-page glossary.

GET STARTED

How to Use This Toolkit

A fundraising auction comes with a handful of terms: starting bid, reserve, increment, consignment, paddle raise and more. None of them are particularly complicated, but each one comes with a decision that can shape how your auction performs.

This guide keeps things practical. Each term starts with a simple one-line definition, followed by what you need to decide, ask or check as you build your auction.

Anything in [square brackets] is for you to complete.

You'll Find

1. **A format comparison and a five-question picker**
2. **Starting bids, reserves and increments, with a worked ladder**
3. **An item setup worksheet and a publish checklist**
4. **Where items come from, plus an ask email you can send today**
5. **The questions to ask before you agree to consignment items**
6. **A seven-step run sheet and three bidding nudges**
7. **A software scorecard and a one-page glossary**

Four Things Worth Getting Right First

✓ **Silent and online are not opposites.** Silent describes the bidding style, private bids rather than an auctioneer. Online describes where it happens. Most silent auctions today are both, which is why the two terms get used interchangeably.

✓ **The starting bid is a strategy, not a formality.** Set it too high and fewer people start. Set it too low and a popular item can close well under its worth.

✓ **A reserve protects you and can also stall you.** It is the floor an item has to reach before you sell. Useful on lots that cost you something, unhelpful on everything else.

✓ **The catalogue is your promotion.** Published early, it is the thing supporters browse, share and plan around before bidding even opens.

Everything that follows assumes one thing: bidding should be easy enough that a first-time bidder never has to ask how it works.

THE FORMATS

Pick the Format That Suits Your Audience

Four formats, and really one question behind all of them: where are your supporters, and how long do you want bidding open?

Format	Best when	How bidding runs	Plan for
Online auction	Your supporters are spread out, or there is no event at all	Days rather than hours, from any device, anywhere	Promotion across the whole run, and postage or collection for every item
Silent auction	You have a room full of people and want bidding alongside the evening	A set window that closes at a time you choose, usually from phones	A visible display, a clear closing time, and someone on hand to answer questions
Live auction	You have a handful of standout lots worth the room's full attention	Real time, led by an auctioneer or MC	A strong auctioneer, a tight lot list, and the right moment in the run of the night
Hybrid auction	You want the people who cannot attend to bid too	Online through the lead up, then live on the day	One catalogue, two audiences, and a single checkout at the end

Five Questions That Decide It

- ☐ Can our supporters all be in one room, or are some of them elsewhere?
- ☐ Do we have items that deserve an audience, or a broad spread of similar value?
- ☐ How many days can we promote for before bidding opens?
- ☐ Who closes the auction, and at what exact time?
- ☐ How do winners pay, and how do they receive what they won?

A rule of thumb: *run the broad catalogue online or silently, and save three to five standout lots for the live auction. Too many live lots and the room has stopped listening well before the last one.*

THE FORMAT

The Three Numbers You Set Before Bidding Opens

A common approach is to set the starting bid at 30% to 50% of retail value: low enough that bidding starts quickly, high enough to protect what the item is worth. Early bids matter more than early amounts, because once two people are competing the price climbs on its own.

Retail value	Starting bid at 30% to 50%	Increment	What it is doing
$50 to $100	$20 to $45	$5	Low entry, lots of small bids. Where first-time bidders usually start
$100 to $300	$40 to $140	$10	The bulk of most catalogues. Keeps bidding brisk without stalling
$300 to $750	$100 to $350	$25	Fewer bidders, larger jumps, still frequent enough to feel competitive
$750 to $2,000	$250 to $950	$50	Competitive lots. The increment stops tiny raises dragging bidding out
Over $2,000	Closer to 30% is usually safer	$100 or more	Your standout lots. These are the ones worth considering a reserve on

Amounts are shown in dollars as a worked example. Most fundraising software adjusts increments automatically by item value, so check the default before you override it.

Reserve Price

Worked example

Starting bid [$500] Reserve price [$750]

Bidding opens at $500 and closes at $700. The reserve has not been met, so the item does not have to be sold.

✓ **Use a reserve when the item cost you something.** Consignment lots, purchased experiences, anything with a minimum return you have already promised a supplier.

✓ **Skip it when the item was donated outright.** Any amount is a gain. A reserve on a donated hamper only stops it selling.

✓ **Visible or hidden is usually your choice.** Visible attracts serious bidders. Hidden keeps early bidding relaxed.

SET UP

Item Setup Worksheet

One row per item, filled in before anything is published. This is everything a bidder needs in order to decide, and everything your team needs in order to close out afterwards.

Item	Retail value	Starting bid	Reserve	Increment	Donated by
[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

Before Any Item Goes Live

- ☐ A photograph that shows the item clearly, in good light, not lifted from a supplier website
- ☐ A description that answers what it is, what is included, and what is not
- ☐ The retail value, so bidders can judge what a good bid looks like
- ☐ The starting bid and the increment
- ☐ Expiry dates, booking conditions and blackout periods for any experience
- ☐ A category, so the catalogue can be browsed rather than scrolled
- ☐ How the winner receives it: collected on the night, posted, or emailed as a voucher

Publish early: *put the catalogue up several days before bidding opens. Supporters who have already picked a favourite arrive ready to bid, and every share of an item is another round of promotion you did not have to write.*

SOURCING

Where the Items Actually Come From

The strongest catalogues mix experiences, services and physical items across a range of values, so there is something worth bidding on at every budget.

Who to ask	What they tend to give	The angle that works
Local businesses	Vouchers, hampers, services, a session or a table	Name them on the item page and in your thank-you post. Exposure to a local audience is the trade
Corporate partners	Higher value packages, tickets, products	Ask through someone who already knows them, and ask for one specific thing rather than a contribution
Sponsors	An item on top of the sponsorship itself	Put the item request inside the sponsorship conversation, not in a separate email three weeks later
Your committee and supporters	Experiences, holiday homes, skills, memorabilia	People give what they own or what they can do. Ask at a meeting and write the answers down before anyone leaves
Specialist suppliers	Travel, luxury and one-off experiences on consignment	Nothing to pay up front, and you only pay if it sells. Read the terms properly first

An Ask You Can Send Today

Subject: Would [business name] like to be part of [event name]?

Hi [contact name],

I'm [your name] from [organisation]. On [date] we're holding [event name] to raise funds for [the cause, in six words].

We're putting an auction catalogue together and I'd love to include something from [business name]. It could be [one specific thing: a voucher, a hamper, a session, an experience].

In return, [business name] is named on the item page every bidder sees, credited in our event emails, and thanked publicly afterwards. Last time, [number] people browsed the catalogue.

If that works, I can collect or arrange postage by [date]. Happy to send anything else you need.

Thanks, [your name] · [phone]

CONSIGNMENT

Consignment Items, Without the Risk

Consignment items are premium lots supplied by a specialist fundraising partner rather than donated outright. You do not buy them up front. You pay the supplier only if the item sells, and many providers structure it so your cause keeps everything above an agreed value.

That makes them genuinely useful for luxury travel and one-off experiences you could never source locally. It also makes the terms worth reading properly, because the protection only holds if you know what you agreed to.

Ask These Before You Agree

- ☐ What is the agreed value we have to reach, and what happens if bidding closes below it?
- ☐ Do we keep everything above that value, or is it split?
- ☐ What do we owe if the item does not sell at all?
- ☐ What are the booking conditions, blackout dates and expiry terms for the winner?
- ☐ Who handles the winner's booking afterwards, us or the supplier?
- ☐ Can we set our own starting bid and reserve on the item?
- ☐ Who does the winner contact if something goes wrong six months from now?
- ☐ Is there anything we are committing to beyond this one event?

Keep the proportion sensible. One consignment lot that does not sell is a lesson. Three of them in a catalogue of twenty is a problem, because they take attention and bids away from donated items that would have sold at any price. Treat consignment as the headline, not the catalogue.

RUN SHEET

Seven Steps, and When to Do Them

Timings assume a catalogue of around twenty items. Stretch them for a larger auction, but keep the order.

When	Step	What good looks like
4 to 6 weeks out	Create the auction	Event details, branding and the first items loaded. Decide your exact closing time now, not the week of the event
3 weeks out	Load and check every item	Photo, description, retail value, starting bid, increment and category on every single one. No exceptions, because the gaps are what generate questions on the night
2 weeks out	Publish the catalogue	Supporters can browse and share before bidding opens. Feature three items they cannot scroll past
10 days out	Invite bidders	Email, social and your ticket page. Link straight to the catalogue, never to the home page
Opening day	Open bidding	Get a first bid onto your featured items early. The first bid on an item makes the second one far more likely
Through the run	Let the notifications work	Outbid alerts go out on their own. Add one human nudge a day for the items sitting quiet
Closing night	Close, invoice and thank	One invoice per bidder covering items and donations together, receipts out the same night, and item supporters thanked before you count the total

Three Nudges to Have Ready

Day two, for a quiet item: “[Item name] is still sitting at [$amount], well under its [$value] value. Bidding closes [day]. Take a look: [link]”

Halfway through: “[Number] items already have bids and [number] have none at all. If you were waiting, this is the moment: [link]”

Final hour: “One hour left. [Item name] and [item name] are both still under value. Last chance to bid: [link]”

DONATIONS

Give Non-Bidders Somewhere to Go

Most guests will not win an item. Some will never place a bid at all. Every one of them turned up because they care about the cause, so put a second way to give right next to the auction: a one-off donation option, a fund-a-need appeal, or a paddle raise with a named goal.

✓ **Name the thing, not the amount.** "[$50] covers a week of meals for one family" gives someone a reason. "Please donate" gives them a task.

✓ **Put the ask where the disappointment is.** The outbid alert and the closing announcement are the two moments people are most likely to give instead of bid.

✓ **Say the total out loud while it is moving.** Announcing progress during the night moves far more people than announcing it the following week.

✓ **Keep it on the same checkout.** Items and donations on one invoice means nobody has to enter their card twice.

The Last Hour and the Checkout

More fundraising is lost here than anywhere else in an auction. Work through this list on the night.

- ☐ Announce the closing time at least three times in the final hour
- ☐ Stagger closing times by category so the whole room does not go quiet at once
- ☐ Have the payment link ready to send the moment bidding closes
- ☐ Send one invoice per person, covering items and donations together
- ☐ Confirm how every winner receives their item before they leave the room
- ☐ Thank item supporters and sponsors publicly within the same week
- ☐ Export the full bidder list while you still have it, and note who bid but did not win

> ***The people who bid and lost*** *are the warmest list you will have all year. They were willing to give, and something else got in the way. Contact them first next time.*

SOFTWARE

Score Your Shortlist

Every platform demonstrates well. These are the things that decide whether the event itself runs smoothly. Score each one from 1 to 5 for each platform you are considering, then compare the totals rather than the feature lists.

What to check	What good looks like	Score
Bidding on a phone	Works in a browser with no app to download, and a first-time bidder can place a bid in under a minute	[ ]
Outbid notifications	Automatic, immediate, and they link straight back to the item so bidding again takes one tap	[ ]
Catalogue setup	Bulk loading, categories, photos, and a catalogue you can publish before bidding opens	[ ]
Bid controls	Starting bids, reserves you can show or hide, and increments you can set per item	[ ]
Payments and receipts	Secure processing, one invoice per bidder covering items and donations, receipts issued automatically	[ ]
More than auctions	Raffles, donations, ticketing and paddle raises in the same system, so supporters are not sent somewhere else	[ ]
Support	Real people who answer, rather than a chatbot and a help article	[ ]
Reporting	Bidder activity, item performance, and a full export of data you own	[ ]
Setup time	Your team can build an auction without training or technical help	[ ]

Ask for the total, not the headline. Platform charges, payment processing and any optional extras should all be on one page before you commit. Pricing differs by region, so always check the pricing that applies where you are fundraising.

REFERENCE

The Glossary, on One Page

Print this one. Every term you will meet, and the decision it puts in front of you.

Term	What it means	The decision it forces
Auction catalogue	Every item available, with photos, descriptions, values and starting bids	When do you publish, and how are items categorised?
Bid increment	The minimum amount each new bid has to rise by	Fixed per item, or automatic by value?
Consignment item	A premium lot supplied by a partner and paid for only if it sells	What is the agreed value, and who keeps what above it?
Fund-a-need	A direct appeal for one specific, named funding gap	What single thing are you asking the room to fund?
Hybrid auction	Online bidding in the lead up plus a live auction on the day	One catalogue for both, or two?
Item sourcing	Securing the items themselves, usually donated	Who is asking, and by when?
Live auction	Real-time bidding led by an auctioneer or MC	Which three to five lots deserve the room?
Mobile bidding	Bidding from a phone or tablet instead of paper bid sheets	Does it need an app, or does a browser do it?
Online auction	Bidding from anywhere, usually open for several days	How long does bidding stay open?
Outbid notification	An automatic alert to whoever was the highest bidder	Are they switched on, and do they link back to the item?
Paddle raise	A live donation appeal, traditionally by raised paddle	Where does it sit in the run of the night?
Pre-bid	A bid placed before a live auction opens	Do you accept them, and how are they announced?
Real-time bidding	Every bid recorded and visible to others instantly	Is a leaderboard visible to bidders?
Reserve price	The minimum an item must reach before you sell it	Which items need one, and is it visible?
Silent auction	Private bidding over a set window, with no auctioneer	What is the exact closing time?
Starting bid	The lowest amount anyone is allowed to bid	What percentage of retail value?

PRO TIPS

Tips That Change the Total

- ✓ **Set the starting bid to invite a bid.** A third to a half of retail value.
- ✓ **Reserve the reserve.** Only on items that cost you something.
- ✓ **Publish the catalogue early.** Every share of an item is another bidder.
- ✓ **Three to five live lots, no more.** The room has a limited attention span and the last lot pays for it.
- ✓ **Mix the values.** Something worth bidding on at every budget keeps more people in the auction.
- ✓ **Give non-bidders a way to give.** Most guests will not win anything. All of them came for the cause.
- ✓ **Thank before you count.** Item supporters and sponsors hear from you first, not last.

Run the Whole Auction in One Place

Raise more, stress less. Everything in this toolkit, from the catalogue to the final invoice, in one platform your supporters can use from their phone:

- ✓ Silent auctions, live auctions, raffles, ticketing and paddle raises in one system
- ✓ Mobile bidding in a browser, with no app for your supporters to download
- ✓ Funds go straight to your own account. GalaBid never touches them

Over 10,000 fundraisers worldwide since 2011. Real fundraising experts, not chatbots.

GET STARTED →

SEE PRICING FOR YOUR REGION →