

How to Pay for SocialSmarts with “Free” Money

By Jay Fiske, [*President, Northwest Benefit Auctions*](#)

Does your school currently host an annual auction? If so, the fastest way to fund your SocialSmarts program is by incorporating a “Raise the Paddle” feature during your Live Auction. Sometimes this part of the Live Auction is also called “Fund an Item,” “Emotional Appeal,” “Cash Call” or other similar names. Regardless of what it is called, it always works. Essentially, the process is one of collective bidding, where your auctioneer will ask all your guests to help raise a certain amount of money for a specific cause.

I have been employing this technique at my auctions for nearly 20 years, and it ALWAYS works. Here is why: Your guests are there to help you toward your goal. We know this because you invited them, and they showed up! Having “opted in” to your event, they will try to find a way to participate in making your event a success. For many, it is bidding in the silent auction, buying a raffle ticket, or bidding in the Live (oral) Auction. One thing we know for sure, however, is that not every potential bidder will be converted to a winner. In other words, most of your audience will get out-bid on the item or items you offer – it is the nature of an auction. So, for many, they are left with a budget they arrived at your event planning to spend, only to not have that happen. This is where the “Raise the Paddle” comes in.

About half to two-thirds of the way through your Live (oral) Auction, have your auctioneer introduce your school principal, or favorite teacher, or a counselor. You want someone who can explain the SocialSmarts program (in two minutes or less) and why it is going to make your school a better place for their kids to get an education. Explain how students that spend more time-on-task learn more, and teachers who spend less time dealing with discipline problems are happier -- that improves retention. Be sure to cover how reduction in bullying will increase attendance by the students, and how social skills learned in the SocialSmarts program will benefit the students for a lifetime. You might even use some of the statistics that show SocialSmarts in schools increases test scores.

After this two minute “set-up,” the auctioneer will then ask the audience to help fund the program by making a direct, cash contribution. He or she should start at the highest level where you are certain you will get at least one bidder to hold up their numbered bid paddle. This level can be determined ahead of time by networking with the people who are most likely to make a larger contribution. If you can get a commitment from someone to “prime the pump” at a high level that is best. Then, from there just work your way down in even amounts. For example, if you start at \$2500, the next level would be \$1000, \$500, \$250, \$100 then perhaps \$50 as the lowest level. As you come down in value, the number of people who will raise their paddle to make a pledge will go up. So, if you had just two people pledge at the \$2500 level, you will have more at \$1000, and by the time you get to \$100 and then \$50 you will have bid paddles up all over the room! Just write down the bid number at each level (the auctioneer reads them off slowly at each level), and then charge them along with their other auction purchases. It works!

I have seen this work in every auction it has been tried, and it is a routine part of the auctions I conduct across the country. I cannot remember a time it earned less than 10% of the auction income, and generally it will bring in 20% or even 30% of your total revenue, all in about five minutes! Typically, schools use this technique to fund computer labs, libraries, playground equipment, faculty enrichment programs and scholarships. It is often used as well to fund teaching assistants and tutoring programs. SocialSmarts is an ideal program to be funded this way because it has the essential elements needed to cause the bidders to want to help: It is an unfunded program but one that will benefit all children equally; All concerned have something to gain including the teachers, administrators, students and parents; It is a program that can be directly measured in terms of its effectiveness; Finally, it is easy to explain the cost/benefit equation, so the audience can visualize the results if only the program would be funded.

Try this at your next school auction. Your audience wants to help. They will appreciate that you gave them the opportunity to do so. They cannot all be successful bidders, but they can all be winners by helping to give the students a program that will benefit them for a lifetime.

Author's Bio:

Jay Fiske is the founder of Northwest Benefit Auctions, Inc. He is a nationally known auction consultant who has helped schools and other non-profits raise hundreds of millions of dollars in his 20 years exclusively conducting charity auctions. He is the co-author of "The Big Book of Benefit Auctions" which is available wherever books are sold, and from his website. His techniques have been adopted by hundreds of schools from coast to coast, resulting in significant increases in their auction income. He is also co-founder of MaestroSoft, Inc. a company that supplies auction management software to schools nationwide. Jay conducts a very popular Auction Workshop once a month at various locations across the country. For more information about a Workshop in your area, or for additional tips on how to get the most out of your schools auction, visit his website at www.auctionhelp.com.