

Transcript – Episode 91 – [Event 180: Flipping Small Fundraising Events on Their Heads for Better Revenue with Sherry Truhlar](#)

Dolph Goldenburg: Welcome to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg. I'd like to start today's podcast by asking: Can I get 5,000 downloads, 5,000 downloads? Can I get 5,000? I got 5,000 downloads. How about six? How about six? Who will give me 6,000 downloads? It's a great podcast. Come on, come on. 6,000 downloads. All right, I got 6,000 downloads over there in the corner. Now, how about 10,000? 10,000. Okay, so this is clearly why I need today's guest because we are talking today with Sherri Truhlar, president of Red Apple Auctions and co-author of the *Essential Fundraising Handbook for Small Nonprofits*. Sherry's passion and business is working with charity auction planners both onstage and behind the scenes, helping them net top dollar from their events. Sherry's definitely found a high energy niche in the world of fundraising, and I think you are really going to enjoy and get a lot from this conversation with Sherry Truhlar of Red Apple Auctions.

Dolph Goldenburg: Hey, Sherry. Welcome to the podcast.

Sherry Truhlar: Hi, Dolph. Thank you so much for having me on.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, true confessions. I love watching videos of you work, and the obvious question has to be asked. I guess it's a two-parter. The first, how in the world did you learn to do that? And the second, how do you become an auctioneer?

Sherry Truhlar: Those are very common questions. Thank you for the compliment. That's really nice though. Addressing the whole, how do you become an auctioneer? There's actually a school that you can go to. Not every state requires that you go to a school to get licensed, but many do, about half do. So, when I was working at General Electric, I thought it would be fun to learn how to talk fast like an auctioneer, and I googled auction schools, and I found one back near my home state of Kansas. So, I took a week of vacation. I went to auction school, and they teach you a bunch of different drills that you can practice. Eventually, if you work on those tongue twisters and those drills, you'll eventually develop a chant. So, voila, that's how I became an auctioneer.

Dolph Goldenburg: Wait a minute. So, there are auction schools, plural?

Sherry Truhlar: I kid you not. There are multiple auctions schools. They're all over the country, so if anyone is interested, they can check out one that's near them, or if they've had a dream destination of going to Missouri or North Carolina or wherever the case might be. They can find a school in that state and go to that school. Every state is a little bit different. Just to be clear, about half of the states in the United States require that you have a license to be an auctioneer, and most of those that require a license require that you have some sort of formal education. Not all; it varies, but that isn't what drove me to go to the school. I just wanted to learn how to talk fast, and once I was at the school I was like, "Wait a second, this is kind of interesting. Maybe I should consider this as a part-time career," and eventually that became full-time.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, what were you doing at General Electric before you are an auctioneer? I'm ready for a good answer on this one.

Sherry Truhlar: Marketing. I worked there about six years. I had four or five different jobs. All of them were tied to some degree in marketing, either related to partner marketing or related to PR, but it was all marketing. My most recent job at GE was related to events, which is part of what rolled in nicely to the benefit auctions that I do nowadays because I certainly understand events, although it was corporate events. Now, I'm doing nonprofit, but there are similarities.

Dolph Goldenburg: Very cool. Obviously, they taught you the chance and that kind of thing, but what else did you learn in auctioneer school?

Sherry Truhlar: Well, when you go to auctioneering school, it's really so much about learning how to run a business and about the rules around auctions. So, we had various speakers who would come in, and they would talk maybe for a couple of hours about livestock auctions, and then someone would come in and talk about auto auctions, and then we'd have someone come in and talk about estate sales and so forth. One of those speakers spoke about fundraising auctions, so we got a smattering of information about types of auctions, but most of it was focused on the legal aspects: what you need to do to set up a business, what you need to be aware of, licensing, all of that sort of thing was really tied into the school itself. It was less so about how to market a Tiffany Glass lamp. That was something that you'd have to study more on your own once you decided to drill down into a particular niche. Obviously, mine was fundraising. But the actual auction school was pretty broad. Do you have any interest in learning how to do a basic chant? I could teach you something very basic.

Dolph Goldenburg: Oh my gosh, this sounds amazing. This is going to be probably horrible for the listeners' ears, but sure. Let's give this a shot.

Sherry Truhlar: Sometimes. I would do this at some of my auctions. Not so much anymore. We don't have time for it, but people are always fascinated by this.

I once offered a free class for an auctioneer. You wouldn't believe the number of people who come back and want me to teach this class again. Here are the rules that you need to understand. It's very important to be clear, and you're really looking at your numbers, right? It's focused on counting up, and what you're going to do is put some filler words in between those numbers. The most common filler words are "dollar bid."

Dolph Goldenburg: Dollar bid.

Sherry Truhlar: The second filler word would be 'now'

Dolph Goldenburg: Now.

Sherry Truhlar: Then the third filler word would be 'wouldyagivea'

Dolph Goldenburg: 'Wouldyagivea?'

Sherry Truhlar: Would you give a... Okay, I'm going to speak this very slowly, and you'll start to see how this comes together: One-dollar bid. Now two. Now two would ya give a to \$1 bid.

Now two. Now two would ya give a two? Two dollars. Bid. Now three. Now three. Would ya give a three? \$2 Bid. Now three. Now three. Would ya give a three? It's that dollar bid. It's the now, and it's the *wouldagivea*. If you start to just using those very simple filler words, it starts to sound chant-like as you speed it up. I'll let you do this in a second, but I'm just going to slowly spell this out for you, so you can hear it again –

One-dollar bid. Now two. Now two. Would ya give a \$1 bid now two. Now two. Would a give a 2?

You're asking for what you want three times. You're telling the crowd what you have once: '\$1 bid. Now two. Now two would a give a 2? \$1 bid. Now two. Now two, would you give a \$2 Bid? Now three. Now three. Will you give a three? \$2 Bid. Now three. Now three. Will you give a three? All right. Boys open the gates. One-dollar bid. Now two would ya give a 2? You see how that goes?

Dolph Goldenburg: Yeah. I'm smiling from ear to ear. It's going to be embarrassing. Brianna, don't cut any of this. This is going to be awesome... for folks listening, Brianna's someone who works with me, and she edits the podcasts, I'm asking her not to cut any of this no matter how embarrassing it is. Okay.

\$1 bid. Now two. Now two. Would you give a two? One-dollar bid. Now two. Now two. What'd you give a 2? One-dollar bid. Now two. Now two. Would you give it to \$2 bid. Now three. Now three. Would you give it three? Three dollars at \$2 bid. Now three. Now three. Would you give a three? Wow! That is harder than it seems.

Sherry Truhlar: Wow that is amazing! You're going to have some flow to it. You're going to be brilliant. At the very basic, that's exactly what, what that chance is. There are different tongue twisters that we do. Some of the tongue twisters are done for enunciation. One of them might be the big brown. What is it? *The Big Brown bug bit the big black bear or Tommy Attatimus took two T's, tied them to the top to tall trees.* Those are annunciation exercises. Then other ones that we'll practice are based on rhythm because you want to have some sort of a nice rhythm. Perhaps, the most popular one of that is called "Betty Botter," and anybody can go online and get the tongue twister about "Betty Botter." I'll do a bit of that so you can hear that here and you can decide whether or not to put it into the podcast. But here's how betty botter goes: *Betty Botter bought some butter, but she said this butter is bitter. If I put it in my batter, it will make my batter bitter. So, I bought a bit of butter....*

It's been a while since I've done this.

Betty Botter some butter, but she said this butter is bitter. If I put it in my batter, it will make my batter bitter. So, she bought a bit of better butter, put it in her bitter batter, made her bitter batter better. So, does better. Betty botter bought a bit of better butter. So, it's all the Bubba, Bubba, Bubba, Bubba, bubba... That kind of rolling is what you're practicing making it nice, and it's really about a woman who bought some butter to make a more flavorful cake. That's what that's about.

Dolph Goldenburg: Wow. I have to say, I think the \$1 now two, now two is a little bit easier for me than the tongue twister you just did. I'm not even going to try that one. Wow.

Sherry Truhlar: That's it. You're, you're an auctioneer at this point.

Dolph Goldenburg: So clearly, you know, you went to auctioneering school. You learned about the legal essence of being an auctioneer. Then you worked on your own to kind of gain the skill necessary to be an auctioneer. So, now you're doing charitable event auctions all over the country. What are some of the items that you see going best across the board regardless of the type of charity?

Sherry Truhlar: Okay. That's a great question, and it's a very common one for that matter. People are always curious about what's hot, what's trendy, what's doing really. Well, regardless of your size of organization, regardless of the size of the charity or the event you're going to want to consider some sort of a trip, travel experience. That can be as extravagant as being in an Italian villa for 10 days, or that can be as simplistic is going down and spending an overnight stay in a nice hotel in the metropolitan area close to you. That could be a weekend stay at someone's private cabin on a lake. That could be someone's bed and breakfast three hours away, trips and travel across the board. People are willing to spend money on a vacation, whatever that might be, small or large. That would be one of them. Another one that is an easy sell is dining experiences.

Everybody eats. Everybody is going to celebrate an anniversary, a birthday. Dining experiences is a huge category, and there are a thousand different ways to play this out, but guaranteed it's going to be a good seller at the auction, and that can be again as extravagant as having a Michelin Star Chef cook dinner in your house, or you go to the restaurant and enjoy a four-course meal with wine tastings, or it could be someone's going to do a drop-off dinner party, right? Mabel is just great at making Czech food, and Mabel is going to come over and prepare or Italian in Czechoslovakia and feast, and you're going to have it dropped off at your house. All you need to do is send out the invitations, and you've got an instant dinner party that's of some ethnicity that you've identified.

Those kinds of packages really sell well.

Dolph Goldenburg: In your experience, like what goes for the most?

Sherry Truhlar: Your best options are going to be the hardest ones to get. If you've got a trendy restaurant, a hot chef who's just won a James Beard award, those are going to be your highest sellers, but don't discount the fact that you can have someone beloved within the community who is willing to do something that is easy to them. Maybe others want to honor that person, and They'll pay the money in order for that to happen. Here's a great example of that. We were short a dining experience in our live auction for a Catholic group that I was working with. It's not a Catholic school, but it's a nonprofit that focuses on getting children into Catholic schools. So, we were short, and I said, "What would really be nice here is what if we just pulled together a desert amount? Do you know anybody who is a great baker and they could just prepare a nice dessert, and we're going to sell that 12 desserts packaged together. Someone can buy that for their office. Someone could take that home for our birthday celebration, whatever the case might be."

Well, the committee all turns and looks at the executive director and they're like, "Francesca, you're a fabulous baker. You should do this." And she's like, oh my gosh, you know, the executive director is now being put on the spot to really do this, but she's fabulous. She prepares all organic ingredients. She uses the right chocolate. She knows how to present it on a serving platter that just looks fabulous. She agreed to make this donation, and she was mortified that it wasn't going to sell well.

And I said, "Francesca, I promise you I will pay \$300 to \$500 for this thing if it doesn't sell." I mean, I'll pay that. Well, we put it up on the auction block. I think it sold for \$1,100. She was astounded. Yes, she makes great desserts, and you can go down into Georgetown in Washington D.C. where I live and see the kinds of cakes that she produces in the windows of Georgetown bakeries. Absolutely no difference. She does a great job, but part of the reason why people were bidding on that too was because of who it was and who was donating it. Don't ever discount the fact that you can have someone who's beloved to the community make a donation like that. She's not a James Beard award-winning baker, but she sold like a James Beard award-winning baker at the auction

Dolph Goldenburg: I also think there's some uniqueness to it. Anyone can go down to their corner bakery, drop 50 to 100 bucks and get a nice cake, but this is really unique because it's like you can't go down to the corner bakery. The only way you get her special cakes is by bidding at the auction.

Sherry Truhlar: That's right. That's right. It actually ties into a nice another category that we target. If you can do one of these one-of-a-kind experiences, the challenge is that some people get carried away, and it may not be as one-of-the-kind as they think it is. However, if you can incorporate that in somehow some fashion, absolutely. That makes for a nice package. You don't want all of your items to be that way, but if you've got something special, pull that in and see how well it does.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, I have to share with you, and this is 10, 11 years ago, so pre-Airbnb, I was running an organization, and we got someone to donate their villa in Tuscany, which slept like 12

people, came with staff, a chef and a maid for a week. Again, this is pre-Airbnb. Now Airbnb, if you want to stay in a villa in Tuscany for a week, you can do that, and then you go on [Taskrabbit], you can get your chef and your maid. 11 years ago, that was not possible. So, we were shocked at how well it sold. I think it went for like \$12,000 or \$13,000 because it was a one-of-a-kind experience. You would never be able to go to a travel agent or go online and get this experience.

Sherry Truhlar: Yeah, that would have been very rare back then. The other thing that was nice about that package is that it's for 12 people. So, you've got multiple families now that are bidding together or an extended family which opens the wallets a bit more. You tend to have higher sales when you've got a bigger home like that, and you've marketed it in that way. That's another nice element about that. The other thing too is that Italy, Ireland, always good sellers. Those two countries at Napa Valley, New York, domestically, I should say those are also good sellers, but you're going to have a hard time not selling Italy and Ireland for good money.

Dolph Goldenburg: When I was an executive director when I was a fundraiser, we would reach out to the convention and visitors bureau of the city that we wanted to offer a package to and say, "Look, we want to offer a package. If you can help us put it together, we'll give you an out of the program book. We know you're not going to staff it, but we'll give you a table during the reception with all your literature, etc. We need at least three nights in a hotel and at least two dinners in four-star restaurants" That's what we needed, and we often had to approach three or four different convention and visitor bureaus until we got one.

We got some pretty great stuff. I think we did one time, did a package to Las Vegas. Another time we did a package to Atlantic City. It was two nights in Atlantic City at a new hotel that had just opened up. It included a limo ride from your home in Philadelphia or New York depending on where you are coming from to Atlantic City, and it included second row seats to a Barbara Streisand concert.

Sherry Truhlar: Oh, oh!

Dolph Goldenburg: The CVB put it all together. So, all we did was place the call.

Sherry Truhlar: I'd be curious to know if you would get that kind of help now. I'm not saying you couldn't, but I have not in my 12, 13 years of doing this business seen that done. Now, you have tapped on a couple of things that I like to talk about. One of them is that you're talking about being in Philadelphia and that you were targeting Atlantic City, which totally makes sense, right? I mean, that's a drivable getaway. One thing that I point out to people is that very often people get frustrated because they can't get getaways. They don't have the contacts and so forth. The challenge that I see is that many people are going about it a bit backward. First off, they're aiming high and going with the hotels first or they're going for the place to stay first.

What I like to advocate is that if you look at a map and you draw a circle around that map that kind of shows you some places that are two to three hours away from your city, those are nice

weekend getaways. That's your example here with Atlantic City and Philadelphia. Well, instead of focusing on where to stay first, go for the easy asks, the easy donations. In a hotel, they have that big display of all of the touristy things that you can do in that city – all of the children's museums, the go-carts, the orchards that you can go pick fruit from. Go for the easy asks first, and those types of places are the easy asks because very often they will donate for an afternoon family of four or they'll give you tickets to the museum or tickets to whatever it is.

Get some of those first, and once you have three or four of those that have already donated to your cause, then start to ask the hotel, the bed and breakfast or whatever you've identified as a place to stay because now you can write to them and say, “Hey, businesses in your area have already donated to us.” So, now you've got clout, right? So, businesses in your area have already donated to us, and we're looking to round out our family adventure package by showcasing your hotel or your bed and breakfast in our live auction package. Then list who's already donated. Well, you've got credibility now because you've already done the work on getting some of these other places to give to your cause. Do that instead of going to the hotel first. It takes a little bit more work, but your end result of getting a “yes” from the hotel or the bed, and breakfast is going to be a lot higher. That's what you did, Dolph, but you had the Chamber of Commerce?

Dolph Goldenburg: The Convention Visitors Bureau.

Sherry Truhlar: You had the Convention Visitors Bureau. Maybe I need to look into that. Maybe that's a great option, but I bet that that's kind of what they were reaching out and doing.

Dolph Goldenburg: That's totally what they were doing. Yeah. Yeah. But I love that idea of go to some of the smaller places, get some restaurants, get some activities to donate and then you go after the hotels. That's a great idea.

It has been fantastic talking with you today, Sherry, and I am psyched that we get to have part two of this conversation, which we'll share next week. Until that time, I bid you adieu. Yeah, I said it. I know it's corny, but I had to do it. Listeners, you can find out more about Sherry Truhlar at www.redappleauctions.com. Every January, Sherry produces a free auction item guide to the best items sold in the previous year, and you can claim one on her website, www.redappleauctions.com. At that site, you can also sign up for her free biweekly newsletter, and, of course, don't forget she coauthored *Essential Fundraising Handbook for Small Nonprofits*. You can pick that up at Amazon.

Well, my dear listeners as this episode winds down, I do hope that you will come back for part two of our conversation with Sherry Truhlar next week. Next week, we're going to discuss with her the nontraditional auctions, and she's going to share with us the best practices for smaller fundraising auctions. You may be surprised by what she is not going to suggest for increasing event revenue. Now, just before we close, let me try out my new mad skills. would a give a give a review, wouldya give a review one, would a give a review two, what a give a wouldya give a, would a give a review Three. All right, so would you give a review for this podcast? You could do it on Stitcher, Libsyn, iTunes or wherever and however we come to you. Just rate and review us.

It will help us serve you better. That my friends is our show for this week. I hope you have gained some insight to help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment.

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