

Transcript – Episode 107 – [Getting the Audience to Shut the F\\*\\*\\* Up at Your Charity Auction with Dean Crownover](#)

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Welcome to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg. Today, we are going to be speaking with the third auctioneer that we have talked to in 2018, but we're not going to be talking about auctions so much as about how to get either crowds silent at your next event so they can actually participate in the auction and the fund-a-need and whatever else it is that you've got going on from the stage. Before we welcome Dean Crownover, though, I want you to close your eyes for a minute just to picture the last charity event that you either went to or that you coordinated. Smell the hors d'oeuvres being passed around. You probably also, by the way, smell the [sterno] trays. If you're smelling the hors d'oeuvres, you probably can picture the servers rushing in and out of swinging doors.

You can see the women in their beautiful outfits, earrings bobbing as they make their way through the crowd. The guys are suited up, and they may just be starting to loosen their ties just a little bit as the drinks have been flowing freely for the last hour or so. Of course, that means attendees are getting livelier. They are making conversation. They're laughing, stomping their feet. In general, everybody's having a good time now that they're all warmed up. They've had a drink or two or three in them. They are ready to drop big bucks on the live auction in the fund-a-need solicitation. All you've got to do is get them in the ballroom, so of course, the venue has a person that walks around with a miniature portable xylophone ringing the bells. You have dispatched all of your team members, volunteers and staff, and ask them to walk around and try to usher people into the main area where the presentation and auction will be.

You finally resort to the PA system, and you're like, "Hey everybody, come on, grab a seat and get ready. The auction is just about to begin." Once the patrons are seated, the challenge revs up. How anyone ever bid on anything with all that noise? How will you make this up to your dear board members who have coaxed their friends into serving on host committees who have coaxed their friends into being the MC? How? How will you tell the audience in a very polite way to shut the F\*\*\* up?

That is what we're going to be talking with Dean Crownover about today. Our guest today is an expert at getting the crowd to be quiet and to pull out their checkbooks to support the cause that they have gathered to celebrate. Dean Crownover, owner of My Benefit Auctioneer, has been working in the entertainment industry for over 20 years. To say the least, Dean knows how to work a crowd. In fact, it's kind of like saying that Starbucks knows how to brew a pot of coffee.

Dean has the distinction of being one of only a couple hundred professionals nationwide designated as a benefit auctioneer specialist, and in Georgia where he and I both live, he is the only auctioneer with that certification. You know what? I have seen him work and he can get the crowd to be quiet. So, let's cue the music and welcome Dean.

Hey Dean, welcome to the podcast.

**Dean Crowover:** Hey, Dolph. I love that cryptic opening.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Thank you. So, tell me, what are some of your tricks of the trade for hurting the caterwauling cats that alive auction audience often turns into?

**Dean Crowover:** Well, I think before we begin, we got to get one thing absolutely straight. I taught Starbucks how to make coffee, so I get that...

One thing I want to say about crowds is what I've noticed over the last couple of years. I've been in, I've been in the game full time since I think 2012 but started my first auction in 2008. What I've noticed in Atlanta, and I don't know about the rest of the country, but in Atlanta or in Georgia, I should say, because I do a lot of gigs around Georgia, they have gotten progressively worse at talking. I don't want to name any younger groups who were on their cell phones all the time, but they may be part of the problem. The truth is it's every age. It really is. I think the key to stopping it all, number one, is a philosophy.

I'm trained in Improv. I'm trained theater, film, TV... all of that. I've done every kind of acting job there is from hand model, which doesn't involve much voice, down to MC. I've been every character you can name. I made a living as an Elvis, Forrest Gump, Blues Brothers, all of that, right? The key is talk through the noise. Somebody taught me that a long time ago, "They're not gonna all quiet down 110 percent, right?" I need them to do it at the right times, during the fund-a-need especially. Here are the key things that I teach my clients. If you want them to stop talking at the right times, number **one**, let's create a timeline that makes sense. That allows them certain periods in which to talk, get their wiggles out. They are kids on a playground.

They've come to see their friends. They're drinking. They're having a good time, and we want them to feel great about giving. For instance, when there is a seated dinner, I have a thing called a *golden time*, where I'll tell my audience or tell my client. This is often new to them. I'll do a short welcoming and pullback. Don't do anything on the stage. Let them put down the entree or take away the salads, put down the **entrees**. Let them just chill out and talk to their table. This is the first time they've gotten time to talk to their table. Let's give them 20, 30 minutes. Then, when all those hors d'oeuvres are put down, let's get right into that fund-a-need. That's one thing. Number **two**: a sound system that goes above and beyond them. That is not as hard fight as it used to be.

I had clients who wanted to skimp on the sound system. I think I have one client. One said, "Oh, you're louder than them. You can talk over him without a sound system." I said, "No, no." You got to have a great sound system. Now, it's a little easier to talk them into it because I've seen it.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** When you said don't skimp on the sound system, what should an organization anticipate paying for a good sound system?

**Dean Crowover:** It's probably between \$1,500 and \$5,000 depending on all the needs, and I'm talking a medium size. If you're a huge celebrity-driven event that's got a lot of bells and

whistles, a lot of audio video, sure, you might go up to \$10,000. Most of my clients are around the \$3,000, because you just need good AB and not the band house system or sorry, not the band system and not the house system.

The house system that goes through a hotel, every benefit auctioneer will tell you, "No." In Atlanta, there are two rooms that will allow that. [Those are] the Delta Museum and the College Football Hall of Fame both have concert systems in the roof, and it works wonderfully. Everybody else and even the managers at these events or these places will tell you, "No, it's horrible. Don't use this." In my contract though, I don't make them sign off that they have to get this particular system, I say it's strongly recommended, and they're signing that they are aware of this and that they have to talk to me. I've never had a case where they didn't have a system or they refused to where I stepped back down, but if that came to it, I would because I can't. I can't make magic happen for them without a great sound system. So, I'll run show of the sound system and then closing the bars at a certain time... [those are keys].

Now, there are a bunch of benefit auctioneer so used to being really hardcore about if you don't shut the bars, I don't go on. I'm never like that. I've never liked that. I've gotten to the point where we put a sign on the bar that says this *bar will be closed during the program*, and we put it up at the beginning. If they want to drink, yes, give them their drink. Don't deny them a drink. Slip them that drink. Just be quiet about it. So, I'm not hardcore about that. We set the tone of this is a fundraiser disguised as a party.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I also love the fact that you are putting signs in the bars because it also sets the expectation for people when they get their first drink. They say, "Okay. No, I should not come back to the bar during the program."

**Dean Crowover:** Right? It's just that, and if they do, yes, fine; those are people who are not going to give her bid anyway.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** That is so true there.

**Dean Crowover:** They're my [inaudible] and God love them. They're very sweet, but they don't need to be there. So, that's all audience for now. Here's the **fourth** part: audience development. This is the hardest part for a client because we work on this over a number of years of getting those who can afford to attend and spend in that room. It's a shift. I have several clients, first time clients that had been building a party. It's easy to build a party. Everybody knows how to build a party. You start with the decor and the fun part first, they don't know they're building a fundraiser. When I come in, I go, "Well, are you a fundraiser first or are you a *friend-raiser* first?"

That really throws them. They could go, "We're both," and I go, "No, no, no, no, no, you can only be one or the other. One edges out." I would say I have out of 100 clients, three or four that said they were friend raiser first. Don't care what we make.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Really three out of four?

**Dean Crowover:** That's another 97 that go money, money, money. So, then I go, "Here's how we need to build it," and it's disguised as a party. The Little things like the signs, the sound, how we're going to run the show are all the setup. You've got to have all that first. Then on stage... It's a lot of things, how we build that show. For instance, I have a lot of chair people that want to go up and introduce themselves. Even they have a hard time getting the crowd to quiet down.

Even if they're eating, so what I'll do is I'll go do a voiceover, make it really big, really fun. I might say, "Now welcome to the stage your chairperson for the Blah Blah Blah." They give a big round of applause, and that applause starts quieting the crowd down because they know there's a show. Now, we have begun the show. So, I'm a big fan of that voice-overs, by the way, are taking place of the MC. MCs are really going away. They're an added component now. I love some of my MC's so I'm not talking bad about MC's and we've got some great personalities in Atlanta. I love working with. So, when they're there, I know we're good. However, in general, having an MC is not as important as it used to be because of voiceover can do that the trick in a third of the time.

And we moved that thing along. That's another thing, too. These audiences don't want more speeches. When's the last time you went to one of these things, and you went, "Wow, I hope they have another speech?"

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Right.

**Dean Crowover:** They want to get to the meat of this matter and get to the party. They know why they're here. You don't have to preach to them, but when we're on stage I will watch, and I'll see from the back before I go on how this audience is responding. Then in my mind, I'll go, "Okay, here's what I need to say or do to get them under control," if you will. It's very hard to explain how I do that. It's just been years of experience. I just jump up there, and I like to think that I'm their friend, that I'm leading this party, you know. I'm the toastmaster here, and I want to do on stage what I want to see, and I want to be controlled the way I would want to be controlled.

So, with a deep respect, with fun, I've gotten more jobs because the auctioneer before me shushed the crowd. I mean really shushed them. There's a difference in shushing. You should not shush in a very hard way. I am different. I'm like, "Hey, y'all, hey. Shush, alright. Alright. Alright." I make it fun, and I've never had a complaint about it ever. I don't normally have to shush them. I come and get them riled up to a point where they come down. You know when a car used to rev up and when you'd hit the gas, it'd get revved up again? [inaudible] So, I will come out and go, "Who loves this organization? You on the right side, do you love them? You on the left side, you love them? Do you in the middle level? Come on! Now, we are here, ladies and gentlemen tonight to have some fun. Are you ready?"

I get them going. Now, this is a long, long segue of course into the biggest way to shut them up. **First**, is start with the fund-a-need. I'm a mega proponent of the fund-a-need first, so we were at the benefit auctioneer summit thrown by the National Auctioneer's Association. It's a convention

for just benefit auctioneers, the best of the best, and they're all great and you learn so much and we had a whole of 100 of us. Who's doing the fund-a-need first? I assumed I was probably behind the curve and there was only about five of us, six of us that are huge proponents of it. We got into a little discussion about it. I've been doing it for about a year now, and my clients are making anywhere from 30 to 100 plus percent more.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Why do you think that is?

**Dean Crowover:** Two reasons. Number one, the live auction, which is typically done first, or if it's a long live auction, you put the fund-a-need in the middle. Still statistically, only about 15 percent of that audience can afford the live auction.

So, that's 85 percent, let's even be liberal, 80 percent that can't afford it. So, they can zone out if you start with that live auction. If it's not fun, they'll go get the drink, they'll talk. 100 percent can afford the fund-a-need or the special appeal at any level. So, when you start that first, it is all-inclusive. Earlier in the evening when they're getting their food, whether it's a food stations or not - because half of my jobs or food stations, half of them are seated dinners, doesn't make a difference to me - you get them fed, and you start the fund-a-need.

It's inclusive of everyone. Number **two**, well I **1a**... they're not tired yet. They're not worried about the babysitter. This could be a weekend or weekday. It's early enough that they're good. In our line of work, we say, "Two drinks, good. Three drinks, bad." The two drinks, they're there on their two drinks to feel good there. They know why they're here. They're connected with the cause because the cause is always the superstar there. We always remind the crowd why they're here. If you get to three drinks and you get to drunky-drunk, then that changes everything.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Before we get to "Two drinks, good. Three drinks bad," I want to rewind quickly and ask you about the fund-a-need first. I've got a question that's burning in my soul, and other people listening might have it as well. If this is a presentation where you're expecting to do more than just a fund-a-need and a live auction, let's say you're also doing some awards or something else, do you still put the fund-a-need upfront or where do you put it?

**Dean Crowover:** For the most part, yes, because I will ask my client, "How much do the awards make you?"

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Fair question.

**Dean Crowover:** How much does the band make you? How much do all the speeches make you now? Now, now, now, now [run] of show - because I'm an A to Z consultant. When they book me, we look at everything. Every aspect, room layout, I am their copilot on everything. So, part of the run of show is a big part of this, right? Typically, it would go like this: doors open at 6:00 pm; hour cocktail; move them into the ballroom; 7:15-ish, the welcoming; we sit them; the welcoming, 10 minutes. Thank your sponsors, and that's the chairs, the Board President,

whoever enjoy your dinner salads are being pulled. That's a golden time. Entrees are trays going down. They got their 20, 30 minutes to talk to each other now.

Then it comes back up, and that begins the fund-a-need typically. When I say fund-a-need, that's the whole setup. That includes someone who is speaking from the organization/ video about why we're here. Then the emotional testimonial from a client, preferably what I call the rags to riches story. They were in a terrible place. This organization came in and changed their lives. Now, they're on a wonderful trajectory somewhere. Then I come up and collect. I may be the one who sets it up. Usually, I am, and I might introduce the video, I might introduce the two speakers. The guests get so quiet during that. I go into the live auction immediately and then the awards, and anything else after that, that doesn't make them money, doesn't matter. I'll tell my client if they leave during the rest of it, you've lost nothing.

You push that fund-a-need and that live after awards, and they decide to leave before, you lost everything. So why? Now, if an award, like I did one of the other night where we agreed that there were one or two particular awards that made sense to do first because they were pretty quick, but they set up the emotional appeal and the analytical appeal of why we're here and what we do. They set it up so wonderfully that we did those two first, and I went right into the appeal. We made 40 percent more. I look at it case by case, of course. That run of show is kind of a standard, and we're only at 38, 45 by the time they get to the awards and then they can [inaudible] as long as they want after that

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Right. Well, well thank you for humoring me and letting me go back to run a show because I know other people were like, "Well, what if we're doing awards and other stuff?" Thank you.

Okay. To move on with two drinks, good, three drinks, bad. What is the ideal time for the pre-cocktail reception so that people have enough time to get two drinks but not so much time that they're on their third?

**Dean Crowover:** I would say nine out of 10 options are now mobile bidding. If they're doing it silently, that's going away, too. Let's assume they're on mobile bidding. So, you only need about an hour cocktail for them to look at the display, time to get their two drinks. They're going to be served at their table. Wine if not, right? Not worried about those drinks that allow them to socialize by some heads or tails if we're doing a game or raffles or whatever.

If they're doing pen and paper, it's an hour and a half before we get them going. But for the most part, it's an hour to get them set. That three drinks means is that they check out because they're getting too inebriated. I'm like a bartender up there. If I see somebody that is so obviously drunk, and this is rare. I think I've only had it happen twice, where it's obvious you are too drunk for me to take your bid, I'm not going to do it. I used to be a bartender for years, so I can read the people. I can also read couples. I'll see husbands and wives bickering on bidding. I'll see wives grab bidder numbers so he can't bid anymore or vice versa. I can read a lot up there. It's amazing

the little stories going on in that audience. They're not all negative of course, it's mostly positive. So that's the two, three drinks. You want them feeling good about giving.

Let me tell you the most important reason to put the fund-a-need first: the emotional impact. It's a rollercoaster. Before, it would start with the heads or tails game, which you can still do, or start with some kind of game or get right into that live auction. Get the fun and the frenzy going on, take a break, pull back the fun and stick this emotional thing in there and then go back to fun. So, part of the live auction, stop everything, get them sad or in a giving mood, then go right back into the fund right after, right? So, it's kind of a disjointed ride. I want a smooth ride. If you start with that fund-a-need first, you get the emotional part first where everyone can give, and they know why we're here.

Then it ends with the *Runaround* or the *Last Man Standing*, which is... Have you talked about this on your show?

**Dolph Goldenburg:** We've not talked about last man standing.

**Dean Crowover:** Usually, it's \$100 level where we give a prize to the last person who I call, who gives, the last bidder number. It's so much fun, but usually, I add to the prize where it's three or four things. It's usually high-end liquor or a trip. The last person to give it \$100 level that I call wins it. So, they can give as many times as they want. Let me tell you the power of it. For me, my record I think is probably making 15,000 to \$20,000. Somewhere in there, I got to get the final number, was this one event that I literally had to stop taking bids so I could move on.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** That's just on the last man standing. So, 15,000 out of \$100 gifts.

**Dean Crowover:** Correct. Under one hundred 5,200 gifts. Yeah, that's the best. If it's a small audience it might go seven, eight, then \$10,000. Even if it's three or \$4,000, that's more than they had, right? But the fun and the frenzy because it's the last part of the fund-a-need I tell you how much we made and because I have, you know, clerks over there calculating it all up and real time.

That segues so much. Now we're in a lively... We're back to where we've gotten the emotional out.

I give them how much we raised. We have this last man standing, and then I give them how much we've. They are so excited because I got to say 99.9 percent of the time, we'd gone way over what the goal was. They are going nuts, and I'm going nuts. Then I go right into the live auction. Now, the first thing I'll get back from a client is the first time I did this, we have our post-call, and I said, "Well, tell me about the numbers." They go, "Well, the live auction did 10,000 less than last year." And I said, "Well, how much did the fund-a-need make? We made \$50,000 more." And I go, "Uh, duh. You don't separate them. You collectively put it all together." She goes, "Oh, oh, the whole night we made \$100,000 more." I said, "Don't worry about what the live auction did because the other part shadowed it."

**Dolph Goldenburg:** It seems to me that you would rather have people give towards your mission than give to get a live auction item.

**Dean Crowover:** For the most part, it's the one part that is 100 percent deductible. The fund-a-need. I have more guests come up to me now and go, "I don't want to buy anything. I got everything. I just want to give. I want to give more." I'm the luckiest man in the world because when you watch the news and everything, that's just all horrible going on and you get to hear the worst of people, I get to go and see the best of people 100 times a year. They are give, give, give, and for the most part it keeps giving. So, you know, I get to hear really great human stories and get to see the best people can be. Somebody walked out on one of my jobs the other day when I was done. It was a big success, and I always hang out in the lobby afterward and talk to people. That's when I hear great stories, and this guy work runs right up to me and says, "I'm going to call you the Prybar." "Pry bar? What are you talking about?" He replies, "You got more money out of me than I was wanting to give, but I'm glad I did it. You're the pry bar."

**Dolph Goldenburg:** That's awesome.

**Dean Crowover:** Other auctioneers. You may not take that. I am the pry bar.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I see a trademark application about to happen here. Okay. Dean, the Pry Bar. Yeah.

**Dean Crowover:** Jim Nye, don't take that.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Hey, we will return to our conversation with Dean Crowover next week when we will hear the story of an event that he was working that was slated for 200 guests, but only 30 people showed up. Through this story, we're also going to learn why the number of warm bodies in a room is not what determines the success of a fundraising auction. Now, between now and next week, be sure to check out Dean's website, [www.mybenefitauctioneer.com](http://www.mybenefitauctioneer.com). You will find great information on planning an auction, and quite frankly, it is applicable whether you're doing an auction or some other type of fundraising event. Dean has also offered our listeners a free one-hour consultation. Just call them up at 404-403-9090.

When you head to Dean's website, which I sincerely hope you will do, you will see that he places a big emphasis on strategic planning prior to a live auction or any type of event, and can I get an amen?

Although Dean's talking about strategic planning for an event, many of the principles he espouses are those that guide any nonprofit organization in the development of its strategic plan, communication, stakeholders, mission, vision, working with committees to move toward identified goals. These are the elements of creating a successful strategic plan as well. So, as all of my listeners now, I'm a little bit of a strategic plan evangelist myself, but with good reason. Organizations that create strategic plans are organizations that can succeed. They are

organizations that can thrive in a competitive environment. You can go to my website, [www.successfulnonprofits.com](http://www.successfulnonprofits.com), and I have got a ton of information that you can download for free about strategic planning for your nonprofit.

Maybe you have been trying to wrangle your own herd of cats while I gave that Dean's contact information. No worries. If you missed it, you can find it and all of the information that we talked about in our show notes at [www.successfulnonprofits.com](http://www.successfulnonprofits.com). I know that I will be much more conscientious about getting my behind in my seat and my lips sealed the next time I attend a charity auction. That next time I think is probably a when Dean is going to be the auctioneer. So, I don't want him to call me out from the crowd. Now, aside from that, I know that I'm also going to have one really important takeaway from today, and that is to put the fund-a-need first in every presentation, get that money up front, and then move on with the rest of the presentation. How about you? What are some of your thoughts from today's conversation with Dean Crownover? As always, if you have not already subscribed to the podcast, you can do so at iTunes, Stitcher, or your podcast streamer of choice. That's 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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