Sales Secrets From a Auctioneer Who Has Raised Over $100 Million

Working with organizations like the Lady Gaga Foundation and Make-a-Wish, superstar auctioneer Howie Schwartz has learned a lot about getting people to open their wallets for good causes.

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For the last 20 years, Howie Schwartz has run Grandstand Sports & Memorabilia, and over the course of that time, he estimates that he's raised over $100 million dollars that has gone to charities like the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the Ronald McDonald House, the Lady Gaga Foundation, and many more.

Every year, Schwartz runs charity fundraising programs for over 1,000 non-profits, offering the organizations this unique selling proposition: *nobody he works for pays him.* GSM covers all of their own travel expenses and doesn't take any money from any auction item supplied by the charity. All Schwartz says he requires from an organization is a stage and a microphone.

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So how does GSM stay in business? They supplement the charities' offerings with their own unique items and experiences, like a swimming clinic for kids with Michael Phelps or the upcoming night of food and drinks with New York Giants superstar Saquon Barkley. GSM sets a minimum bid on these items and experiences, and the benefiting organization receives a percentage of the minimum bid plus 100 percent of every dollar bid above the minimum with no ceiling. "It's

a win-win," says Schwartz.

But no one wins if the auctioneer can't get donors excited to spend, and that's where Schwartz shines. In the spirit of charity, he shared the lessons he's learned along the way about connecting with audiences and getting people to start writing checks.

Put your audience in your sales pitch

"My style is very engaging and comedic. I've learned over the years that when auctioning, it's just as important for buyers to connect with me as they do with the actual item or experience I'm offering. So let's say we're doing a celebrity chef experience. I'll describe the amazing food, and then I'll say something like, 'Imagine, gentlemen, if your wife can actually watch David Burke cook in the comfort of your own home, she's going to learn from the greatest cook in the entire world. So whatever money you spend on this experience will not only support the foundation, you're going to save several thousands of dollars for the rest of the year because you're not going to want to go out to eat!' Or like for the Michael Phelps kids swimming clinic, I'd say, 'Imagine your child becomes so good after learning from the greatest Olympic swimmer of all time that they get a swimming scholarship to college. So if you spend a few thousand tonight, I just saved you $300,000 by the time your child goes to college!'"

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Photo credit: Howie Schwartz

Value is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder

“I was auctioning off a dinner experience with Lady Gaga at an event and she screams my name right in the middle of it. I was at $8,000, seeing who’s going to go $8,500, $9,000. And she says, ‘Howie, come over here!’ So I did and said, ‘Yes, Lady Gaga?’ And she says, ‘Add these to the lot.’ And she took off her earrings. Now, I don’t know if they were worth 10 bucks or $10 million. So then I said, ‘Lady Gaga, if there’s anything else you’d like to take off to enhance this lot, by all means, feel free.’ And she stood up and did like a fake striptease. She took off like a scarf. The place went wild and we wound up getting around $50,000, something crazy like that. And I don’t know how much the earrings were actually worth. They could have been costume jewelry for all I know.”

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People want to buy memories, not things

“People don’t get as excited bidding for items that they feel like they can easily go out and buy, like a nice watch or piece of jewelry. What they want is an experience that they cannot facilitate on their own. They don’t know the producers who can get them backstage at the Country Music Awards, for example, and we do. And we’re very conscious to concentrate on experiences that people can do for their kids. Because what we’ve seen is that people may have a preconceived budget of what they’d spend on themselves at a fundraising event, but if they can come home with an opportunity for their child to learn sports from a superstar or to attend a concert and meet an entertainer of their dreams? That budget gets tossed out the window.”

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