Auctions

The key to an auction is a professional auctioneer—someone who is entertaining and keeps the show moving at a fast pace. The price for an auctioneer is $15 an hour in Corpus Christi, Texas, for example. It will no doubt be higher in larger cities. The auctioneer may donate his time.

The other essential ingredient is to auction unusual items. People want to bid on items that they can't buy at the neighborhood gift shop. Frequently, the most successful items are services. At an auction held to raise campaign funds for Texas State Representative Bill Harrison, then a candidate for Congress, the attractive, 34-year-old bachelor agreed to have dinner with the highest bidder.

Every Senator has a hard hat he can part with. A hard hat signed and donated by Senator Howard Baker brought $35 in Birmingham, Alabama. There GOP Senate challenger Jeremiah Denton topped off his statewide race with an auction last year on November 1.

Almost any item autographed by a public figure increases in value. At an auction to raise funds for state Senator Hardin Cox in Northwest Missouri, a necktie belonging to U.S. Senator Tom Eagleton (not autographed) brought $10. At the same event, one that was autographed by Representative Dick Ichord brought $25.

Other items might include dinner for eight at the home of Congressman and Mrs. So-and-So, or a weekend at the beach house of a local celebrity, or the use of a private plane for two hours, or dog walking every weekend for three months donated by a local teenager in the district. Humorous items add enthusiasm to the event.

Everything for an auction should be donated. This requires reliable volunteers who use some imagination to recruit the items—the more creative the better.

Hank Parkinson, who staged the auction fundraiser for Bill Harrison in Corpus Christi, Texas, suggests having the auction in conjunction with a traditional fundraising event. Plan the auction after the cocktail hour and before dinner. Parkinson advises, "Allow 30 minutes for the auction—no longer."

At the Harrison auction, the ticket price was $25 a person or $40 a couple. An additional 20 percent of the gross amount from ticket sales was raised through the auctioned items. The event netted about $12,000.

Parkinson frequently uses an auction to help peak the campaign. He advises holding it late in the campaign and selling tickets six weeks ahead of the event, thus providing a constant cash flow and numerous news opportunities. With the Harrison auction he got 14 news breaks in 60 days. Parkinson advises holding the auction on the Friday night before election day. "In this way, you have set the tone for getting out the vote."

Yard sales

Weekend or Sunday yard sales (or garage sales when it rains) are similar to auctions in that items are also donated, but yard sales work best in local races. One such successful sale was held in Washington by a former Capitol Hill aide challenging for a congressional seat. He knew many families in the community who contributed items, frequently second-hand junk. This event can be used to raise a few thousand dollars from people who would not ordinarily contribute. These include neighbors of the supporter who donates the use of his home for the event, plus those locals who read about it in the classified section of the paper.

Representative Phil Sharpe (D-Ind.), a former aide to onetime U.S. Senator Vance Hartke, called on his Washington friends to donate objects when he challenged a congressional incumbent in 1974. He raised between $1,000 and $3,000 of otherwise untapped dollars in Washington every two years (until his friends ran out of second-hand junk!).

"As a challenger, $1,500 seemed like a lot," says organizer of the event Jack Riggs, administrative assistant to Representative Phil Sharpe. But Sharpe and company haven't continued with yard sales because "it takes so much staff time. For us, a special event is a lot of work for not too much money," says Riggs.

But the low cost of holding a yard sale may be the event's main attraction. There is no overhead here except the few dollars spent on classified ads. Flyers can be xeroxed and tacked to trees in the neighborhood or distributed door to door. As an alternative to the brie and chablis party, a yard sale can be easily organized if volunteers agree to solicit sale items and organize the sale.

Proceeds from items purchased are considered straight contributions by the FEC. If the campaign committee sponsors the yard sale, any items donated are considered in-kind contributions to the campaign committee.