

Client Stories

Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center



For 180 years, Thompson Island has been a refuge for Boston's most vulnerable young people, providing them inspiration, education, and challenging experiences that develop character and promote teambuilding. Today the Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center (TIOBEC) programs continue this legacy of philanthropic leadership, empowering students to set goals, excel in school, learn to lead, and develop the compassion they need to make a difference in the world.

Highlights

- TIOBEC began using the automated Greater Giving system to collect as many payments as possible on the night of the auction.
- Adopting Online Bidding brought in record sales for their silent auction and slashed the amount of time the group spent on administrative tasks.
- Using Greater Giving to register credit cards allowed the Thompson Island team to focus on thanking donors the very next day, instead of trying to collect money from them.
- Built-in integration into Raiser's Edge made a big difference for the auction team, allowing them to seamlessly transfer event data and start generating thank you letters.

Challenge

The Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center has grown their annual gala significantly over the last 14 years. It now contributes about 25% of the overall annual fundraising budget and attracts between 450-500 attendees.

But with this impressive growth has also come additional administrative overhead. Before implementing Greater Giving, it could take the auction team at least two weeks to enter all item sales and collect payments for the winning bids and donations—and often revenue was lost.

They were also running out of space at the venue trying to accommodate all their auction items, and people had a hard time reaching the bid sheets. The group has kept their silent auction open through dinner to try to push bids higher, but in the past it was clear that it was distracting guests from the program because they would leave the ballroom and return to the bid sheets to continue bidding.

Senior Development Officer Sarah Swanson and her team wanted a change. They began looking for an automated system to collect credit cards at the event, to help ensure payments were collected for all auction items and create a smooth registration process. They also realized adding mobile bidding to their platform could solve their space crisis and modernize their silent auction.

They also had one other need: integration with a donor management system. The Thompson Island team manages their donor data with Raiser's Edge, and post-event, they had always entered their auction data into it manually. But the time had finally come that they needed something better, faster, and simpler.

Solution

After evaluating several software platforms, Swanson and her auction team selected Greater Giving. They've been using it successfully since 2010. Then, in 2015, the group added Online Bidding and moved over to using Greater Giving Online for data entry.

After adopting Greater Giving, the auction group ended the auction with 99% of all items paid for! They had to do only a small amount of post-event reconciliation the next day.

Thanks to the rapid reconciliation, they were also able to immediately make thank-you calls to donors and transfer their data into Raiser's Edge. There was no data entry to do, so the team was able to send out acknowledgement letters right away. It was a huge help to Swanson and her team to be able to say "thank you" to donors promptly.

And adding the mobile bidding component also rectified a number of the Thompson Island team's woes. First, they wanted something shiny and new for their guests to use, and Greater Giving's Online Bidding fit the bill. They also wanted to keep guests in the ballroom during the program, and make the best use of their space. Mobile bidding made it possible for guests to bid while still participating in the program, and the auction committee no longer needed to make space for paper bid sheets.

But it wasn't magic. Swanson and her team put in time before the event to train on the new system, with the help of their Greater Giving Online Bidding concierge, Jeanine.

"I give Jeanine full credit for getting us ready for the event," Swanson says. "With her help, the Thompson Island team did simulations in the office with volunteers and staff prior to the event to get everyone familiar with Online Bidding, and it was terrific."

Results

Mobile bidding was a hit with the Thompson Island auction guests, and Swanson says they experienced way more bidding activity than normal. The auction group brought on additional volunteers specifically to help guests with placing their bids on the new Online Bidding system, and people loved it.

They tried out a couple different methods of providing hardware to the bidding helpers. In 2015, volunteers helped provide tablets for assisting with mobile bidding; then in 2016, the group bought 10 tablets of their own and outfitted them in bright green and blue so guests would know right away who was available to assist them. It worked great.

All in all, the group received extremely positive feedback from guests about the event, and about the new Online Bidding platform. Best of all, it drove bids higher than ever before! In the end the group's silent auction, which previously brought in between \$10,000 to \$15,000, exceeded \$25,000 in the first year and reached \$30,000 the second year with the help of Online Bidding. The boost in revenue more than made up for the cost of adopting a new system.

Online Bidding's integration with Go Time, the online data management and sales system, also increased processing time for auction sales and also data entry accuracy. The integration of Greater Giving with Raiser's Edge the next day also allows the organization to immediately send acknowledgement letters and better thank their donors. Overall the Greater Giving platform has transformed the organization's auction.

To build on the momentum of the last two year's auctions, Swanson says, they plan to open up the silent auction early next year to raise bids higher and spur even more generosity.

Tips from Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center

- Train, train, train! Run your staff and volunteers through an Online Bidding simulation and make sure they know how to enter sales into Go Time and check-out guests, so they know what to expect on the big night.
- Bring in the team the week of the auction, feed 'em pizza, and run a one-hour test event.
- Have volunteers watch the training video prior to the test event, so they can bring in their questions.
- Make sure to have extra volunteers to manage registration and mobile bidding.
- During the first couple of years of integration ask for extra card readers and set-up one to two additional registration stations to ensure a smooth process for your guests.