



JDRF Lincoln and Greater Nebraska

JDRF is the leading global organization funding type 1 diabetes (T1D) research. JDRF's strength lies in their exclusive focus and singular influence on the worldwide effort to end T1D. They envision a world without type 1 diabetes, and their mission is to accelerate life-changing breakthroughs to cure, prevent and treat T1D and its complications.

Highlights

- Using tablets and mobile card readers at registration dramatically reduced crowds and wait times, and gave the event a unique casual atmosphere.
- Pre-communication with guests about mobile bidding is key to shorter registration lines and a fluid silent auction experience.
- Mobile bidding placed the guest experience at the focus of the event, and the chapter raised nearly \$10,000 more.
- A rigorous approach to data saved the auction team time, headaches, and made a huge difference in guests' experience at registration.

Challenge

The yearly gala is a staple of the JDRF Lincoln and Greater Nebraska chapter's annual budget. When Laura Eberly took over as Development Coordinator in 2013, there was a lot of pressure to meet or exceed the event's fundraising goal.

The Lincoln and Greater Nebraska chapter has always been data driven, looking closely at what sells well from year to year in order to strategically solicit auction items and develop their audience. Executive Director Jayne Ullstrom wanted an automated way to track which items were selling well over value, so they could make an effort to procure more of those top sellers in succeeding years.

In its infancy, the annual gala attracted on the order of 320 guests, and the auction made around \$58,000. The new auction team experienced a steep learning curve their first year—registration at the event was always about four lines deep, and many of the processes in place for check-in and check-out were archaic and not well suited to moving people quickly in and out of the event. Many guests weren't on the list, or didn't have all their information in the system, causing a big slow-down. Guests also experienced long delays at item pickup: volunteers took each individual bidder's receipt and gathered their winnings while the guest waited.

The chapter hosted the event at a relatively small venue, making it logistically difficult to get people through registration. Guests felt squashed in the silent auction area with so many people hovering over the bid sheets of tightly-packed auction items.

Eberly and Ullstrom knew they needed to update technologically in order to improve their guests' experience and keep them coming back each year. The team's auction revenue was already high compared to market value, but with the right atmosphere for guests to enjoy themselves, they knew they could push it even higher.

Solution

For their 2014 auction, Eberly and Ullstrom decided to add mobile bidding. It was a lot to take on as a sophomore team, but the ability to participate in the silent auction from a mobile device would give guests the freedom to move about the venue—key to traffic control in such a small, awkward space. Guests could leave the silent auction room and continue to bid from the cocktail area, or from the ballroom during dinner. Competition for coveted items was stiffer, since guests no longer needed to hover over auction items to win and had more time to fight over them before the silent auction closed.

Eberly, who was in charge of registration, made another big change to cut down on wait times. Instead of handing out bid cards for the live auction right there at check-in, she simply held off until dinner and delivered them to each table. "That way," Eberly says, "if you need to make changes to your guest list, then you've already made them by the time you hand out bid cards." Making error correction invisible to attendees was just another way the team enhanced the overall guest experience.

Eberly also made huge improvements to streamline check-out. After printing out reports that listed all the winnings (organized by table number), she delivered lists of packages with buyers to the check-out team. When the team moved items from the silent auction room to the item pickup room, each bidder's winnings were bagged before check-out had even begun. Every bag was checked against the master list by the lead volunteer before it left, and guests were asked to sign their receipts to verify they had received all their winnings.

Now that it was Eberly's second year as development coordinator, all the data in Greater Giving was hers. With the help of robust, built-in reports, she could see the results from her efforts the previous year and use them to make targeted improvements in 2014.

"The reports are a great way for us to see who spent money at tables, who participated in the Fund-A-Cure, which items had the best ROI," Ullstrom says. "The data even helped us structure our Board of Directors' giving." For example, Ullstrom learned from the Greater Giving reports that the "Wine & Spirits" section was always a best-seller, and guests routinely bid over value on those items. Now Ullstrom and Eberly ask the board to donate everything they can that's alcohol-related, because they know it'll sell well.

The pair's obsession with data doesn't end there. Eberly is incredibly strict with getting phone numbers and information from all their guests, and won't relent until she gets them. "You don't want to have to collect data on the night of," Eberly says. "It's a huge time suck. I'd rather that guests get to enjoy the night."

Results

The auction team's strictness about data integrity has led to a number of big improvements in the event flow. With no new guests to register on the spot, registration moved far faster than before. And collecting everyone's phone numbers prior to event day meant that they got set up to mobile bid before they even arrived at the event, cutting down on explanation time by registration volunteers.

One big change Eberly made? "Pre-communication is key," she says. "You have to let people know what's going on, what to expect." She sends out a mailing the Monday before the event, letting people know how to set up their phones to bid, how to start looking at the auction, and what registering at the event will entail. That way, she says, "Guests can call earlier in the week when the office isn't overwhelmed and ask questions."

Thanks to their effort, most people showed up to the event already knowing what to do on their mobile devices. And any guests who didn't have a smartphone could call ahead and there would be volunteers available with iPads to help them bid.

Their first year using mobile bidding, the Heartland chapter saw a nearly \$20,000 increase in overall fundraising revenue, which was an incredible jump for an event their size. But Eberly wasn't going to stop there with making the

experience even better and more welcoming to guests—she wanted to attract a larger audience and design an atmosphere where they were happy to spend more money.

In 2015, the auction team's investment in the guest experience paid off, with the event attracting more attendees than in any recent years. Their 320-guest gala had grown to over 400 guests, and the chapter raised \$10,000 more than they had in 2014.

But Eberly had even more improvements in mind. Greater Giving made credit card readers available for mobile devices for the first time in 2016, making it possible for volunteers to register attendees on tablets. And so instead of traditional registration tables, volunteers waited at cocktail tables with tablets in hand, waiting to check in attendees as they arrived.

"Registration didn't look like registration this year," Eberly says. "There were always lines of people waiting—but this time, it wasn't crowded at all." Guests could get drinks and mill about while they waited for a volunteer to be available. It was casual, low-pressure, and Eberly received tremendously positive feedback from her attendees on how quickly and smoothly they all got through registration.

And they did it with more guests than their small venue had ever seen before: nearly 450 people. It went off without a hitch.

Tips from JDRF Lincoln and Greater Nebraska

- The less your volunteers have to do at registration, the faster it moves. Distribute bid cards directly to tables right before your live auction, and collect as much data as you can about guests before event night.
- Make registration a casual affair by setting up cocktail tables instead of registration tables, and register guests with tablets and mobile card readers.
- Great volunteers make a great event. Try to get the same people each year if you can, thank them effusively, and listen to their feedback.
- The best way to fundraise more is to focus on data—and use that data to guide your procurement choices from year to year by putting things in your auction that guests will want to buy.