



# Celebrity Waiters Luncheon Organization

The Celebrity Waiters Luncheon Organization has been serving the Puget Sound area for 37 years, raising funds annually for local charitable organizations in the areas of Education, Health, Human Services and Children/Youth.



## Challenge

Like many other charitable organizations, Celebrity Waiters Luncheon Organization has seen its fair share of ups and downs. Early on in the pandemic, Celebrity Waiters decided to take their 2021 annual fundraiser online to address ongoing health and safety concerns. Guests would attend the virtual event by watching a video stream and participating in the auction, all from the comfort of their own homes. This would be the ninth year that funds from the event benefited their partner, Uplift Northwest (previously Millionaire Club Charity), an organization preparing people in the area for job readiness.

Well into planning the virtual event, restrictions on gatherings began to roll back—and a surprising new opportunity emerged. Up to 70 guests could attend the event in-person, as long as it followed health and distance guidelines. Event Director Suzanne Hight knew many of their attendees would enjoy getting together and felt comfortable doing it in person, so Celebrity Waiters quickly pivoted to a “hybrid”-style event: a combination of a live and a virtual fundraiser, with all guests bidding in one auction together.

## HIGHLIGHTS

Celebrity Waiters expanded their virtual event to include a small, in-person gathering with limited attendance. The live event was safely spaced and socially-distanced, and attendees had such a good time that they stayed long after the program was over.

The virtual and live audiences had different event night programs to provide the best possible experience for everyone. Guests watching from home saw a shorter program that included pre-recorded video to avoid delay or latency issues.

Both groups bid on items in the auction at the same time, and closings were announced frequently to keep it fair for everyone. Only a few items were exclusive to the in-person group, which were bid on separately.

Then came the hard part: Providing in-person guests a traditional benefit auction experience, while ensuring virtual attendees would still enjoy the night. Hight knew the five-hour live event program wouldn't translate well to the video stream—they would need a separate, shorter show for those watching from behind a screen at home. To add an extra air of exclusivity to the live event, Celebrity Waiters also wanted to offer additional special auction items for in-person guests to bid on.

This new plan would all require a little more than their current event software could offer. They needed something else—a new solution capable of managing a complex, multi-faceted event. So Celebrity Waiters went looking for the software solution that would need to allow both groups of guests (in-person and virtual viewers) to participate in the auction together. On top of ever-shifting CDC recommendations, and a short-staffed venue, the event team had a difficult job ahead of them.

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## Solution

Celebrity Waiters chose the Greater Giving event software with online bidding because it was capable of managing all the complexities of their hybrid-style event. And it offered more features to make the fundraising team's lives easier—providing tools to build an event website and sell tickets online, which automatically collected guest information and stored it in their database for future events. The event team also made good use of the built-in Giving Board, recognizing donors on the live feed when they donated during the Fund-A-Need.

Celebrity Waiters still had to create a different program and slide deck for each side of the event: one longer, full-featured show for in-person guests, and another shorter program streamed to remote guests from the studio. As Hight says, "It was like planning two events in one." But it was worth it—the 2021 Celebrity Waiters fundraiser was the first event held in Seattle after the shutdown, and their attendees were absolutely thrilled at the chance to get together and socialize.

Professional auctioneers Fred and Ashley Northup hosted the video stream from the studio, while David Silverman was on-site at the hotel to provide virtual and live guests both with personalized attention. The pre-show for virtual guests included a pre-recorded video with instructions on bidding, and the hosts frequently reminded bidders about upcoming closings to keep the online auction as fair as possible.

To maintain social distancing throughout the event, organizers spread tables around the ballroom, and eliminated the usual cocktail hour from the program. Guests were required to masks upon arrival, and were informed the hotel would be taking temperatures. With so many people furloughed, the hotel venue was critically short on staff—but thanks to Celebrity Waiters's long-standing relationship with the hotel, everyone was able to adapt and adjust to make it work.

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## Results

Celebrity Waiters wanted the best of both worlds with their hybrid event, and they achieved it. Guests at the in-person event had such a wonderful time that many stayed long after the program ended. Though event staff experienced some latency issues streaming from the studio, the auctioneers were resourceful and adapted. Those attending from home felt like part of the fun as they bid and donated on their mobile devices with Greater Giving's Online Bidding platform.

Overall, it was a fantastic event. "We're very happy with the results, and with Greater Giving," says Hight. Celebrity Waiters held a successful fundraising event in the middle of a pandemic, and still managed to provide that exciting and inspiring experience their donors expected from a live benefit gala, while making sure guests at home felt included and appreciated.



### Tips from Celebrity Waiters

- Make sure your venue has enough bandwidth to stream your video feed from anywhere in the room, as hosts may move around the space while presenting.
- Hire a team who can work alongside you who can adapt to new situations and overcome, and choose vendors and auctioneers who understand your event, and have the ability to change course quickly.
- Plan separate elements of the program catered to the in-person audience as well as the online audience to keep everyone engaged and giving throughout.
- Practice, practice, practice! A hybrid event takes more time to plan, and presents greater challenges, than just a virtual event.