

# the auctioneer



December 2020/January 2021

The official publication of the National Auctioneers Association

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# Virtual gala insights

What did 2020 teach us about pivoting?

**W**ith a global pandemic, most auctioneers had to pivot in 2020, but perhaps none more so than benefit auctioneers, who in the past have relied almost solely on in-person events. Now, benefit auctioneers have made big strides in virtual and online events, finding a way to keep raising those crucial donations for nonprofits in need. Let's take a look at what we've learned so far.

In the second week of March 2020, the balloon popped on in-person fundraising events, and auctioneers like Freddie Silveria, BAS, of Freddie Silveria Auctions, and Sherry Truhlar, CAI, BAS, of Red Apple Auctions, began scrambling with cancellations across the board. But like any true professionals, they put their heads down and got to work.

"I studied every single thing I possibly could," Freddie said. "I would watch webinars, talk to auctioneers and software companies—and I knew I couldn't do this without AV."

Freddie utilized his NAA connections to learn and inspire his transition.

"Scott Robertson and Misty Marquam were the first two who gave me the confidence that this could be a thing," he said. "I just ran with it."

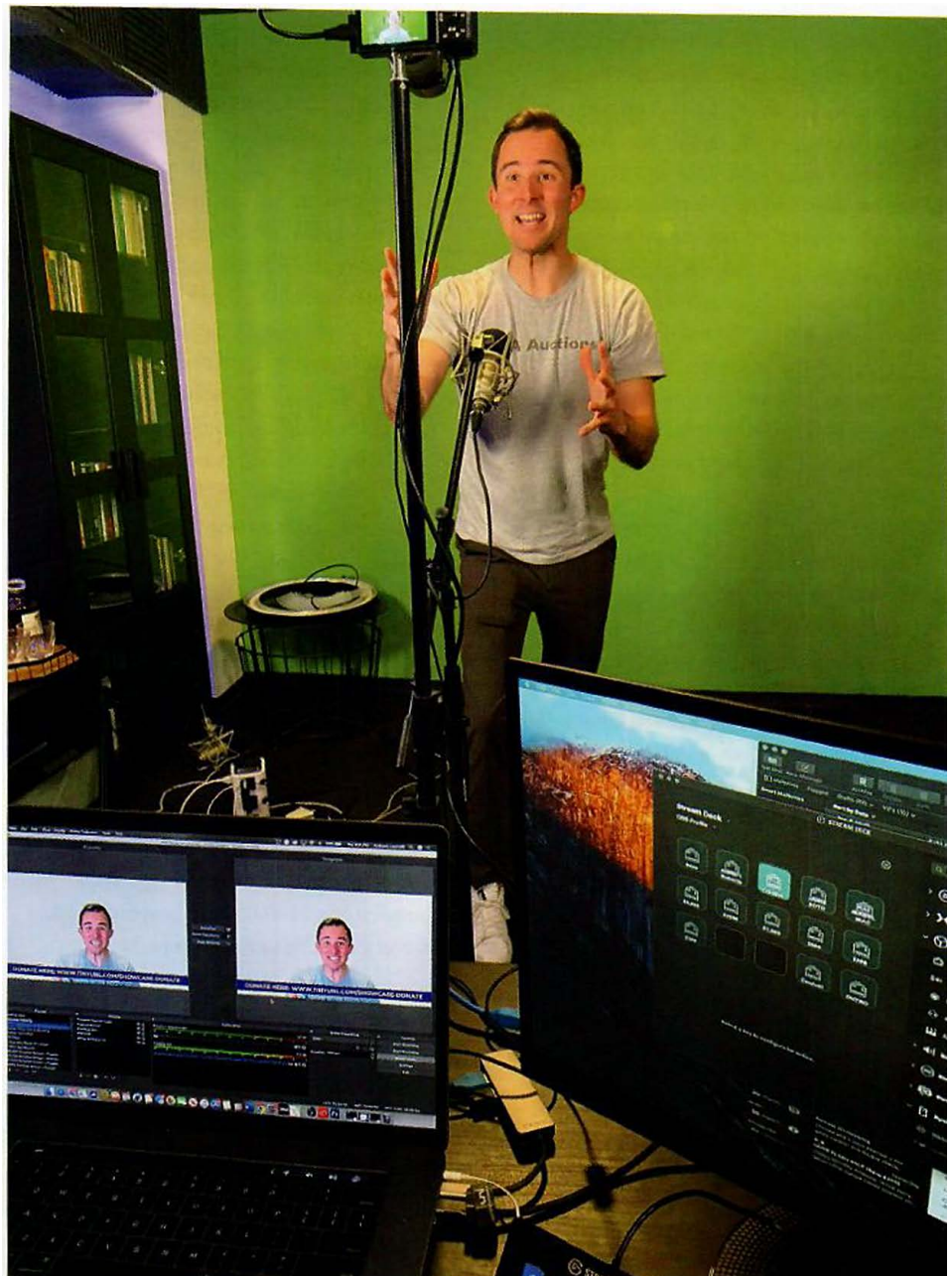
Sherry also started reaching out. She spoke to a friend who owns a production studio and they spent several hours looking at different options.

"We were testing live stream and literally the day I went to send out an email about our solution, that's when Maryland rules came down that you can't leave your house," Sherry said. "That's when I started thinking about webinars."

Much of Sherry's work in 2020 has been via webinar. She found someone who knew Zoom really well, learned everything she could, visited with clients, and off she went.

For both Freddie and Sherry, the transition did not happen overnight.

"It took me until April 30 to do my first virtual event—a good six to seven weeks,"



Freddie said. "I didn't care about the bells and whistles, I just wanted it to work and to create a reputation that this works."

And it did work, Freddie's first event raised tens of thousands of dollars more than the nonprofit had ever done. But that was just the start.

## Managing clients

Once they knew what was possible, Freddie and Sherry began working with their very different west coast/east coast nonprofits to help them understand all was not lost.

"I've had to do some attitude adjustments with my clients," Sherry said. "For the events that tend to be more of a party than a fundraiser, I tell them the first thing they have to do is change their attitude. The party is all about the people—the people make the

party—so if you're telling me these people like each other, and you help facilitate that, your attitude needs to change to say 'we didn't bring COVID, COVID came to us, so we're adapting and by golly, if we're going to have a virtual party, it's going to be the best in town.'"

And benefit auctioneers rely heavily on that nonprofit's attitude.

"It's really about you as the auctioneer transferring your energy to the sourpusses you might be working with, initially," Sherry said, "because you're not going out and talking to the donors until the day of, so they've got to carry that enthusiasm."

Now months into virtual events, most clients are not coming to benefit auctioneers unless they're ready to talk virtual. Freddie said you need to allow your clients to come to you when they're ready, but continue to

offer support. When a client comes to him now, he has a lot to show them from behind-the-scenes videos to final products to donor experience examples.

Sherry also tells her clients that they need to know their donors. That if local guidelines are allowing live events and your donors are pushing for that, understand it.

“You gotta know who’s giving you money and what they want to do, because that’s going to influence your choices,” she said.

## Marketing

With so much of a benefit auctioneer’s business coming from in-person event attendees enjoying their performance and hiring them for their own event, 2020 also saw a shift in marketing. Because you can do all the successful virtual events you want, but if no one knows about them, you’re doing yourself a disservice.

“It’s all about video. Video. Video. Video.” Freddie said. “I use iMovie and if we’re doing a live stream on YouTube, I get the download and find two to three minutes of a sweet spot and edit that video, put my logo on it and blast it everywhere.”

And he does this for every single event. His highlight reel is his brand. After the post-

event videos, he works on tagging and email marketing, but he encourages video content because “people need to see you.”

For those who are not as social media savvy, there are other avenues for marketing.

“I hate social media; I’m horrible at Facebook,” Sherry admits. “I have stayed true to my marketing, which has always been heavily email based. I’ve also led free and paid classes.”

Sherry emphasizes Freddie’s approach to video, though, stating that if you are doing virtual events, the public ones, like on YouTube, are much easier to use in marketing. In her experience, webinars have been difficult to record because it’s hard to show everything.

## 2020 takeaways

COVID-19 is not going away any time soon, so what has 2020 taught benefit auctioneers that they’ll take into 2021?

“Learn technology,” Sherry said. “And it’s way more work in the consulting process. Forget the set number of hours you used to have for consultations.”

Sherry also understands the importance of partnerships. “People need business,” she said. “How can you band together in your market and outside your market?”

While the biggest learning curves for Freddie at first were the latency factor, learning about permits for alcohol and online raffles, and making sure the donor pays for the shipping cost, now he says it all comes back to attitude.

“We gotta be jazzed about virtual,” he said. “We’re all in, this is what we have to do right now, so let’s do it!”

Nonprofits still need money, and the decisions made live, on the fly, are why nonprofits bring in and trust professional hosts/auctioneers.

In all, 2020 taught benefit auctioneers to pivot to survive, and many ended up thriving in new and exciting ways.

“When you think about the creatures that have survived the eras, it’s not the fastest creature that survives,” Sherry said. It’s not the smartest, most intelligent—it’s the one who has adapted to change. It’s the one who’s evolved.” ❖

*This article was adapted from a 2020 virtual Benefit Auction Summit session. Look for this and more content from that event free to members in February at [pathlms.com/naa](http://pathlms.com/naa).*