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PREMIUMS CAN ALSO OFFER DONORS GREAT DEALS FOR BIDDING

An auction is only as strong as the interest in the items offered for sale.

So it was not surprising that a "Green Monster Experience" at Fenway Park in Boston, Mass., went for \$5,100, the second highest item in an auction for the Foundation for Belmont Education. Belmont is in the middle of what baseball fans call "Red Sox Nation." Boston's Fenway Park is home to the Red Sox.

Restaurant gift cards, luxury accessories, and local or regional sporting events are some of the most popular auction items, according to Jon Carson of Bidding for Good in Cambridge, Mass.

Unique experience opportunities -- exotic trips, outings with celebrities, and the like -- also are big draws but are more costly.

Carson recalled one auction that offered an afternoon plane ride with actor Harrison Ford flying his own plane. The item went for \$50,000. Mitch-Stuart, Inc., with offices in California and Florida, arranges a chance to become a "fighter pilot for a day" and participate in five or six dogfights (real bullets not included) in a "Top Gun" package.

"Those types of items are geared to people with discretionary income ... affluent baby boomers," Carson said.

Michelle Cohen of Mitch-Stuart, whose firm packages luxury and experience travel for fundraising auctions and for business incentive programs, said her firm can put together a package as simple as a weekend at a nice nearby hotel or to a nearby resort, or something more complex like a cross-country trip with hotel stay, tours and other amenities, or trips to exotic locales. The key is to determine which type of package is best for a specific organization. One fundraising package Mitch-Stuart put together was a donor patrolling with the Alliance of Guardian Angels chapter in New Orleans, plus a stay at a local luxury hotel and eating at a few top restaurants.

Package plans, which include some meals and sightseeing packages, draw strong bidder interest, Cohen said.

Cohen and business partner Stuart Paskow illustrated the diversity of interests nonprofits must consider when asked what sort of trip would draw their bid. "I would probably choose the Florence (Italy) one," which includes time with a chef, Cohen said. She also liked the Sonoma (California) wine-tasting package. Paskow, who once placed the winning bid on a fishing trip to the Florida Keys, said he is intrigued by a trip to Kenya to watch the migratory wildlife.

Companies that specialize in travel packages can get discounted prices based on volume, which allows an organization's auction to offer a starting bid at less than what one might expect to pay by making the arrangements herself. If the bids rise above normal retail price, the winning bidder realizes "there is a charity component to this," Cohen said.

"People are looking for values, and many times they find it" through auction travel packages, Cohen said. — *Gary Morton*