

Tricky Tray and Basket Raffle Planning Workbook

What a tricky tray is and how to run one - prize tiers, basket themes and assembly, entry handling and the drawing, plus a volunteer-roles worksheet you can fill in and hand out.

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A tricky tray is a basket raffle. Themed baskets go on display, each with its own container beside it, and guests drop entries into the containers for the baskets they want. At the end of the night a winner is drawn for each basket. The term is regional - it is especially common in New Jersey, while the same event is called a basket raffle, a basket social, or a penny social elsewhere - but the format is the same everywhere.

That format is what makes a tricky tray workable for school and community groups. Because a guest chooses which baskets to enter, a table of modest, broadly appealing baskets gives every guest something to enter for, and the donations that fill such a table are the kind a local manager can often approve on a short timeline. This workbook walks the plan from prize tiers to the drawing, and finishes with a volunteer worksheet you can fill in and hand out. The rest of the library is at [free fundraising resources](#).

Plan your prize tiers first

Decide the shape of the table before you ask anyone for anything. Tiers keep the display balanced and stop you from ending up with a table of near-identical gift baskets and nothing to photograph for the event promotion.

Tier	What belongs in it	How many	Where it comes from
Everyday baskets	Themed bundles of small items - treats, toys, household goods, craft supplies	The bulk of the table	Treat companies, party-supply catalogs, merchandise donors, and your own families
Featured baskets	Larger themed bundles with an obvious anchor item, such as a cooler or a game console	A modest handful	Merchandise brands and larger local companies
Grand prize	One or two items worth queuing for - a family activity package, a signed team item, a getaway certificate	One, occasionally two	Longer-lead programs; ask for these first

The tier a basket sits in should be obvious from across the room. If guests have to read a card to work out which baskets are the big ones, the display is doing less work than it could.

Theme every basket

A theme is what turns a pile of donations into something a guest wants. It also solves your sorting problem: every item that arrives has an obvious home, and gaps become visible while there is still time to fill them.

- **Family movie night.** Streaming-friendly snacks, popcorn, a blanket, a movie gift card.
- **Backyard cookout.** Grill tools, sauces, a cooler, outdoor games.
- **Coffee and quiet morning.** Beans, a mug set, a bakery certificate, a book.
- **Art afternoon.** Supplies, a sketchbook, a class certificate from a local studio.
- **Game night.** Board games, card games, snacks, a puzzle.
- **Spa evening.** Bath products, candles, a robe, a salon certificate.
- **Sports fan.** Team merchandise, tailgate gear, tickets where a program offers them.
- **Little ones.** Plush toys, picture books, craft kits, a family attraction pass.

Write the theme on the sign-up sheet before the donations arrive. Volunteers filling a named basket bring better items than volunteers told to bring "something for the raffle".

Source the donations

Basket raffles need many small donations rather than a few large ones, which means sending many short requests in parallel instead of one perfect letter at a time. Gift-card donors, treat and candy makers, family attraction chains, and merchandise brands are the four groups whose donations combine into themed baskets most easily - our roundup of [companies that donate raffle prizes](#) covers who to ask in each.

Check the company's page in the [donor directory](#) before you write; we track 4,000+ companies, and each page describes what that program has historically offered and where to check its current status. Then use the [donation request letter workbook](#) for the wording and the [donation request timeline planner](#) for when to send, remembering that grand-prize asks need the longest runway of anything on your list.

Assemble the baskets

Assembly is where a tricky tray is won or lost visually, and it is the step most often left to the last evening.

1. **Log every item as it arrives.** Donor, item, theme it belongs to, and where it is stored. An unlogged donation is a donation you will find after the event.

2. **Stage by theme, not by donor.** Set out one box or bag per theme and sort into it as items come in, so gaps show up while there is time to fix them.
3. **Build height.** Risers, shredded paper, or an upturned box at the back of a basket makes the contents visible from across the room. A flat basket reads as an empty one.
4. **Wrap in clear film.** Contents stay put and stay visible, and nothing wanders off the table.
5. **Card every basket.** Theme name, a plain contents list, and the donor names. Guests choose from the card as much as from the basket.
6. **Note the terms.** If a certificate inside has expiration or blackout terms, put them on the card. A term the winner discovers later is a problem you handed them.
7. **Photograph the featured baskets.** They are your event promotion, and they are far easier to photograph the day before than on the night.

Entry handling and the drawing

The mechanics are simple, but they are the part guests will remember if they go wrong.

- **One container per basket, clearly labeled** with the same number and theme name as the basket's card, so a stray entry can be put back where it belongs.
- **Number the baskets** and use the same number on the card, the container, and the entry slips. Numbering after the display is set is far more error-prone than numbering it as you build.
- **Sell entries in one place** with a visible price list posted at the table. Decide the structure before the doors open and do not change it mid-event.
- **Have guests write name and phone on each entry slip**, and say clearly whether a winner must be present to claim.
- **Announce the closing time** for entries more than once, and hold to it.
- **Draw in a fixed order** - lowest basket number to highest - with two volunteers at the table: one drawing, one recording the winner against the basket number.
- **Record every winner in writing** as the draw happens, not afterward from memory.
- **Have a plan for unclaimed baskets** and state it before the drawing starts, so nobody is deciding it under pressure at the end of the night.

One housekeeping note before entries go on sale: raffle rules vary by state and are set by state charity regulators, and some states require registration or a permit. Check your own state's requirements first. *That is informational guidance, not legal advice.*

Volunteer roles worksheet

Fill this in, print it, and hand a copy to each person. Most tricky tray problems are really staffing problems that were never written down.

Role	What they own	Name	Phone
Donation coordinator	Sends requests, tracks answers, logs items as they arrive		
Basket lead	Themes, assembly, cards, and the finished display		
Display and setup	Tables, risers, numbering, containers in the right places		
Entry sales	The sales table, the posted price list, and the change box		
Floor volunteers	Restocking slips, answering questions, keeping containers tidy		
Drawing caller	Runs the draw in basket-number order		
Recorder	Writes down every winner against the basket number		
Prize handoff	Matches winners to baskets, checks the record, handles unclaimed items		
Thank-you lead	Written thanks to every donor within the week after the event		

After the event

Thank every donor in writing, whether or not the basket they filled drew the most entries - and do it while the event is still fresh. Then write down two lists before the details fade: which companies said yes, and which themes drew the most entries. Those two lists are what makes next year's plan a shorter evening's work than this year's was.

Common questions

What is a tricky tray?

A tricky tray is a regional name, especially common in New Jersey, for a basket-raffle event where guests drop entries into a container beside each basket they hope to win, rather than buying one ticket for one overall prize.

How is a tricky tray different from a silent auction?

A tricky tray rewards volume - many themed baskets, many small entries, and a drawing decides each winner. A silent auction rewards a short list of high-value items, and the highest bid decides each winner.

Do you need a license to run a raffle?

Raffle rules vary by state and are set by state charity regulators, and some states require registration or a permit before entries are sold. Check your own state's requirements before you sell anything. This is informational, not legal advice.

How many baskets does a tricky tray need?

Enough that the display looks full and every guest finds several baskets they want, which usually means many modest baskets rather than a handful of expensive ones. Plan the table you can actually fill, then build up from there.