

Auction Inn finds winning bid

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Bob Musser, Bob Kierman and Jeffrey Woodman stand inside the Connections Cafe.



LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - Everyone has heard of eBay -- arguably, the world's largest online auction. Now, Lancaster businessman Joseph Besecker, who founded Auction Inn in July 2004, is bridging the gap between the for-profit and nonprofit worlds. He accomplishes this, said Jeffrey Woodman, vice president of business development at Auction Inn, by "tapping into the tremendous pipeline of unwanted items that virtually every household or business has stored away.

"Our aim is to build nationwide alliances with nonprofits to create a network of convenient neighborhood drop-off stores that make it easy for anyone to sell their items online," said.

The main thrust of the business is to benefit the nonprofit sector, which is growing at a rapid pace and often has a difficult time finding money to support their causes. Many nonprofits are starting to realize they need to treat their programs as businesses rather than organizations whose sole job is to help society.

Woodman said Auction Inn uses the social enterprise business model, which combines the best of the nonprofit world with the best of the for-profit world. Woodman says Auction Inn sees their business as a "huge opportunity for developing new income for the not-for-profits."

Proceeds from Auction Inn's sales are "dependent on the participation of Auction Inn's 'back office' involvement in operating the social enterprise.

The Lancaster Boys and Girls Club is the first nonprofit to benefit from Besecker's business model.

"Mr. Besecker is on the board of directors of the Boys and Girls Club of Lancaster," Woodman said.

Combining his board responsibility as part of the "employment training task force" and his interest in eBay, Besecker saw an opportunity "for the club to develop more revenue for high-end thrift items by selling on eBay. The additional revenues help support Auction Inn's Work-Able training program.

Besecker is a successful businessman because he embraces multiple streams of income for his business, as well as using this model for the nonprofit sector.

"Auction Inn is planning on partnering to help nonprofits turn in-kind donations into cash. (Auction Inn works) to provide job training and first time job skills for socially and economically disadvantaged people. Auction Inn presents a partnership opportunity for the not-for-profit organization to enhance their income and sustainability," Woodman said.

Some of the methods Auction Inn uses to sell its products include: virtual fundraising; next-generation yard sale; antique management; mobile appraisal service; train-inn, trade-up program; e-business solutions program; and the Auction Inn showcase.

Virtual fundraising's sole mission moves to "help organizations become more self-sufficient, effective, and support fundraising efforts from beginning to end. Auction Inn will help organizations raise money with no cost and very little effort," Woodman said.

The next-generation yard sale saves the nonprofit the hassle of getting participants to buy tables, go through early morning set-ups and individually price each item for sale. Auction Inn takes care of all of the details for the virtual yard sale on eBay.

For antiques management, Auction Inn takes care of the pricing, photography and all the other work involved in selling antiques and collectibles on the Internet.

"In the end, our clients see more dollars for their estate items by using the world's most powerful marketplace, eBay," Woodman said.

The mobile appraisal service allows Auction Inn employees to provide evaluations for clients' items right at the their homes. They also provide a pickup service for all the sale items.

The trade-inn, trade-up program works with retailers and commercial clients to rid their stores and warehouses of extra inventory.

"The client does not have to deal with trade-in merchandise," Woodman said. "Trade-Inn items are taken to Auction Inn. We will take the customer's used and old merchandise and turn it into cash."

The e-business solutions program blends philanthropy with business-to-business dealings.

Woodman said the benefits of the e-business solutions program are numerous: "New market opportunities, generates higher sales volume, moves secondary products, provides alternate sales channels, moves dead stock, opens new distribution channels worldwide and donates dead stock to favorite charities, where Auction Inn turns it into cash."

The last arm of Auction Inn's business model is the "Auction Inn Showcase," which Woodman describes as "a new television show developed by Auction Inn that provides a unique twist on showing one-of-a-kind antiques, collectibles, art and other items from individuals and dealers in south-central Pennsylvania.

"The variation in the Auction Inn showcase is simple," he said. "You can actually buy the rare items (you see) on the show!"

The program runs weekly on Blue Ridge Cable, and Woodman said the format is changing to "adhere to the mission of Auction Inn," which they will unveil in the future. Customers watching the show can buy the items that are showcased right away. The show's format is educational and informative, highlighting histories and unique markings of each item."

All items on Auction Inn's eBay storefront are priced at a \$25 minimum. Woodman noted that best-sellers have the same qualities. They're: in good condition; in their original box; have brand names; are unique; are expensive; are shabby chic, vintage or antique; are made in the United States, Europe or Japan; and, in the case of clothing, are new or have tags still attached.

Finally, Besecker and the rest of the staff at Auction Inn realize the importance of job training and mentoring, especially for disadvantaged youth. Work-Able job skills training program, another arm of Auction Inn, meets that need.

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"Our core mission helps us work more closely and effectively with non-profit organizations," Woodman said.

Auction Inn works closely with QVC, UPS and Bosch Security Systems to provide classroom training and on-the-job training for students from the Boys and Girls Club and Teen Challenge.

According to Woodman, the program works "to further the education and training of the Boys and Girls Club members and other nonprofit clients by employing them at the Auction Inn facilities as trainees in areas, such as customer service, computer research, digital photography, descriptive writing, inventory management, packing, shipping, and marketing positions."

Auction Inn has created a niche that combines business smarts and community service.

And thanks to eBay as a market venue, the Lancaster Boys and Girls Club benefits as well as other nonprofits in the future by Besecker's vision and Auction Inn.