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New Jersey Q & A: **Herbert Caspert**

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Entertaining the Bids at Auction Time

By LINDA LYNWANDER

HERBERT CASPERT, a bankruptcy and liquidation auctioneer whose office is based here, acknowledges that he has two distinct personalities. One he presents as he sits in his office explaining his business in a genial and self-effacing manner. The other, the one he projects when he's auctioneering, he says, is totally opposite.

"I'm a different personality when I'm working the crowd," said Mr. Caspert, who is 59 years old, 6 feet tall and very broadly built. "I yell at the people, my voice gets loud and I wear a cowboy hat." Mr. Caspert said he had to be both an actor and a super-salesman to succeed at his profession.

He is a general and commercial auctioneer as well as a business appraiser and a liquidator. Mr. Caspert's business, Herbert B. Caspert Auctioneers, auctions real estate and the contents of furniture stores, machine shops and factories. He is a member of the National Auctioneers Association, which has its headquarters in Kansas.

His auctions occur when businesses go into bankruptcy or foreclosure, have lost their leases or are affected by other events like deaths, fires, sickness or retirement. His clients include creditors, banks and lawyers as well as the owners themselves.

Mr. Caspert's father, also an auctioneer, started him in the business in New York City when the son was in kindergarten. "I followed Dad around after school, tagging merchandise and polishing furniture instead of playing football," he said.

After a stint in college and a longer one in the Marines, Mr. Caspert moved his family to New Jersey and opened a furniture store in Paramus, but still continued auctioneering on the side. In 1978, he sold the furniture store and devoted himself full-time to the auction business.

Mr. Caspert and his wife, Bernice, who live in Englewood Cliffs, have two sons, Ronald and Mitchell, and a daughter, Lisa. Ronald Caspert has become his father's partner.

Q. Have you noticed more companies going under in the last few years?

A. Yes. We're doing about 10 percent more business over the last five years or so. People overexpanded in the 1980's; everyone was flying high. More inexperienced people came into business with less capital. They just couldn't handle the high rents.

Q. So your business must be doing well?

A. Yes and no. People aren't coming out to the sales the way they used to. We're not getting the prices we used to see. The recession hasn't helped. Our volume has increased, but the dollar returns aren't what they were five years ago.

Q. Do you charge your clients a set fee?

A. We get a percentage of what we sell — 10 percent commission.

Q. Do you set prices?

A. Never. We let everything go. We don't take any restricted sales. If I think bidding should start at \$50 and someone begins at \$5, that's O.K. with me.

Q. Besides the actual auction, which is usually one day, there must be a lot of planning that goes into each event.

A. Of course. We have to look at the goods and tag and catalogue them right down to the store fixtures. Then we check the legalities, see if there



F.N. Kinney for The New York Times

Herbert Caspert, a bankruptcy and liquidation auctioneer based in Englewood Cliffs.

are tax liens. We advertise the sale through newspapers and fliers to special customers and hire help for the day of inspection. After the sale, there's a lot of bookkeeping, checking out the merchandise, remitting funds, helping with deliveries. It takes up to two weeks to prepare for a sale.

Q. You mentioned having an auction personality. There must be a lot of showmanship that goes into holding a good event.

A. I can best liken it to being a ringmaster for the circus. You have to have a strong voice and talk fast while doing several things at once. Have a good sense of humor, comments, gestures.

And you have to control the crowd. If you find you're losing their attention, you say, "Listen, if you want to talk, go outside to do it." Selling too slow is another problem. We sell an item a minute, even though we could probably do 100 items an hour.

Q. How do you influence people to buy something?

A. We develop a circus around the people; we provide a day's entertainment. They fall into line. A person may have no intention of buying, but it's all in the momentum. He gets caught up in the bidding, the excitement of it all.

Q. Do you explain the terms of the sale before someone bids on an item?

A. Everyone gets a paddle with a number on it to hold up when he wants to bid on something. The paddle has the terms of the sale, which is: as is, where is, no guarantees of quality and condition, and one hour to the next day for pickup.

Q. If the contents of a business are being auctioned off, do only people in the business show up?

A. Yes and no. There are a lot of what we call "users," people who can use an item. Then there are dealers who may have no idea what they're buying, but they will bid if it seems

like a good buy for resale. Then there are the window shoppers.

Q. Is there a certain mood at these auctions?

A. It's like the OTB parlor. Everyone is standing in a corner with the secret of what he wants to buy, but he doesn't want anyone to know who he is or what he's bidding on. That's one reason we give them paddles, for anonymity.

For example, if someone buys an item from a machine shop, how can he take it back, rebuild it and sell it back to the same people who were at the auction unless he keeps his identity sort of secret while he's bidding.

Q. Is security a problem at your auctions?

A. We'll hire an off-duty cop in certain places when jewelry or computers are being sold. We keep an eye on things at all times.

Q. Aren't some of these auctions kind of sad affairs, because you know it's somebody's tragedy that has led to the sale in the first place?

A. We clean up the offices, dust broom them so it looks like it hasn't the air of someone who has been thrown out. Every case has a story, it's true, but I don't get too involved in it. Sometimes the owners are on the premises even. It doesn't bother me. You do your business and you go on.

Q. Do you buy anything yourself before the auction starts?

A. No. You can't wear two hats. I never tell my friends what I'm selling, either. They don't know the ins and the outs of the business; if they bid and don't get it, they may get mad. And the highest bid always gets the item.

Q. What's the strangest property you've ever auctioned off?

A. It had to be the funeral parlor. Pews, slabs, embalming equipment. We got a good turnout for that one.

Q. How about the biggest auction?

A. When W. T. Grant liquidated their stores, all 250 of them that were east of the Mississippi River. Companies, from A. & P. to Safeway food chains, sent representatives to bid on the individual stores.

Q. Where do you conduct your auctions?

A. Anywhere in the United States, but mainly in the tristate area. In New Jersey, we go to industrial cities like Paterson, Jersey City, Newark.

Q. Have you ever had an auction where no one showed up?

A. A frozen ravioli plant. The auction was held by order of the owner in a huge freezer. We met the owner, who had flown to Seacaus from Florida for the sale, but nobody showed up. I guess the bidders knew the food had lost its life.

Q. How does someone become an auctioneer?

A. There are auctioneering courses, like at the Missouri Auction School, but mainly you have to start small and develop a following. This is a business where your reputation precedes you. Over the years, you develop a rapport with people in various trades, and you can call on them to help you plan for specific auctions.

For instance, we auctioned off an airplane some time ago. The only thing I knew about planes was to buy a ticket at the airport, but I have a friend, a maven who buys and sells used planes. He came over to help me look at it and price it.

Q. Has anything ever made you mad while you're up on the platform?

A. Oh, maybe people who try to get away with something. They say, "Oh, I thought I paid for two chairs," when they knew we always sell by the single piece. I guess it's human nature to try to get away with something if you can. If there's an argument, we take another two minutes and put the item for bids again. ■