

You're a what?

Auctioneer



by Elka Maria Torpey

Norman Abrahams chants at breakneck speed, familiar words rolling off his lips: “Five dollars, give 10—\$10. Now \$15—now \$20. I’ve got \$20—now \$25. Give \$30—SOLD for \$30 to number 100, for \$30!”

Norman is an auctioneer in West Point, Nebraska. His fast-paced oratory builds excitement, encourages bids, and lets him sell a large number of items in a short amount of time.

How did he learn to speak, and sell, so quickly? Auctioneering school, says Norman, is what taught him the tongue-twisting tricks of the trade. Chanting—the method of speaking auctioneers use—requires clarity, speed, and rhythm. It’s something most auctioneers learn through formal training.

A small number of schools throughout the country offer auctioneering programs. These programs typically last a few weeks to a few months. Students learn breathing and voice techniques and perform practice drills to increase their speed and precision. They might also study subjects such as ethics, public speaking, advertising, and auction law.

Apprenticeships are another way for auctioneers to hone their skills. By working with an experienced auctioneer, apprentices learn firsthand how the job is done.

Formal education or experience isn’t just helpful; in many cases, it’s required. Auctioneers in more than half the States need to be licensed, which usually requires completing a State-approved training program or apprenticeship, having a high school diploma or GED, and passing a written exam and criminal background check. Auctioneers who sell land, houses, or other buildings anywhere in the country must also have a valid real estate license.

After they’re qualified for the job, some auctioneers take the title of colonel. This practice dates back to the Civil War, when only military colonels were allowed to auction off the spoils of war.

Now, as then, almost anything can be sold at auction. Art, machinery and equipment, and livestock are just a few of the items traded in this way. Some auctioneers specialize in one or more types of products; Norman’s specialty is antiques and consignments.

Norman has been an auctioneer for 20 years, and he’s learned a lot in the process. But he didn’t always know he wanted auctioneering as a career. “I started off in farming,” he says. “I went to local livestock auctions, and I became interested through that.”

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect earnings or employment data specifically on auctioneers. But according to the National Auctioneers Association, auctioneers’ earnings vary considerably. Most are paid on commission. For example, they might take home 10 or 15 percent of the total proceeds from an auction.

The association also reports that many auctioneers work part time. Norman works full time, although his hours are fewer on days when there isn’t an auction. “I work mostly Monday through Friday,” he says. But like many auctioneers, he also works weekends—and evenings, when necessary.

A lot of what Norman and his colleagues do happens before the auction begins. “In our case,” says Norman, “we go to people’s houses and haul stuff in. We also set up the auction.” Moving large items means that Norman sometimes needs physical strength, but not all auctioneers do heavy lifting.

Auctioneers are versatile in the work that they do. Some, like Norman, help to set up and pick up after the

Elka Maria Torpey is a contributing editor to the OOO, (202) 691-5719.

Norman Abrahams might have something to sell you—but you'll have to compete to buy it.

auction. Others might appraise or repair items, organize pieces by type or price and put them into lots to be sold together, or create a catalog of what's for sale. Still others might do paperwork or process sales, but Norman says that many auction houses have office staff to perform those clerical tasks.

Advertising and marketing are usually a big part of an auctioneer's job. Identifying and attracting prospective buyers—and sellers—is critical for generating business.

During an auction, Norman stands on a podium or raised platform, called an auction block, in front of a crowd of people. He rapidly describes the item or items for sale, and the bidding begins.

As higher and higher bids come in from the crowd, Norman acknowledges each in turn, chanting all the while. Down bangs the gavel—indicating a winning bid—and up comes the next item for sale.

When not on the auction block, Norman acts as a bid spotter, or ringman. “When we work as ringmen, we're ‘catching’ the bids,” he says. “If someone's interested in buying an item, we watch for them to give a signal.” A signal might be a raised paddle or some other sign of acceptance, like a nod. Then Norman brings the bid to the attention of the auctioneer working as the bid caller on the podium. Norman and a colleague take turns spotting or calling bids throughout the auction.

But to truly understand what it's like to be an auctioneer, Norman says there's nothing like

firsthand experience. “Go to an auction,” he says. “See how it's handled and what goes on.” Doing this, he says, will help people decide if it's the career for them.

“It's a fun job,” says Norman, adding that for him, meeting people is the most interesting part.

But dealing with so many people also means being able to control a crowd. In the excitement, noise levels can escalate and distract from the bidding. “People come to the auction and get to visiting,” says Norman. It's his job to curb conversation, while at the same time creating a fun and energetic atmosphere that draws people into the bidding.

Besides, when Norman's on the block, auction goers need to pay attention. If they don't, what they want might be going, going...gone!

