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Auction 101

Inland colleges cash in by listing surplus online

07:29 AM PST on Tuesday, March 7, 2006

By **JANET ZIMMERMAN** / The Press-Enterprise

Karen Abbey not only found a home for the orange fiberglass chairs that were a fixture at Cal State San Bernardino since the university opened in 1965, she sold them for \$400.

Abbey, the university's property manager, has little doubt she'll also find takers for a gently used high chair, a belt sander in need of work and some broken plumbing rooters she has posted on eBay.

In three years, online auctions raised \$54,723 for Cal State San Bernardino, almost five times what was made in traditional auctions over several years before, Abbey said.

UCR has made about \$45,000 in three years.

The two schools are among a growing number of colleges nationwide that are turning to online auction



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sites to boost sagging budgets, clear warehouses and peddle unusual items.

Greg Vojtko/The Press-Enterprise

Karen Abbey, purchasing office property manager at Cal State San Bernardino, pulls a flatbed scanner from a box in an area where she stores surplus items on campus.

Previously, the institutions relied on professional auctioneers to sell the goods at local, live auctions, and salvage operators to scrap the rest.

Schools are looking to the international marketplace to turn a better profit on their surplus property, which ranges from the typical -- desks, tools and phones -- to the offbeat, including artwork, airplanes and ion synthesizers.

The new owner of the 17 orange chairs from Cal State San Bernardino came from Japan to retrieve them. The young man pulled up in a van packed with Levis and vintage clothes, apparently on a mission to resell Americana overseas, Abbey said.

Abbey knew the molded chairs, designed by Charles and Ray Eames and manufactured by Herman-Miller, were "a hot commodity" because she'd seen them on eBay, where she is also a private seller.

"A lot of them needed repair. They had the caps off the ends missing and were rough and in need of sanding," said Abbey, who considered the sale quite a deal because it allowed the university to buy new chairs for its atrium. At traditional auctions, chairs sell for as little as 30 cents each.

Damaged, But Desirable

While Abbey knew the chairs would be sold, she wasn't so sure about a Powermatic wood planer. The machine was listed on eBay when the Old Fire swept through San Bernardino in 2003 and damaged it.

"I pulled it off (eBay) because I didn't feel I could sell it," Abbey said. "My e-mail box was flooded with people wanting to know what happened to it."

She reposted the planer with full disclosure of the damage, and bidding opened at \$75. The winning bid: \$585. "That's great for a huge paperweight. We might have gotten \$30 from a metal scrapper," she said.

One of the favorite success stories among colleges using eBay comes from Pennsylvania State University, which sold a globe inside a wooden table for \$11,600.

"It turned out to be an antique piece," said Pam Coffman, who handles the university's eBay sales. The table was snatched up by a museum in the Netherlands, which also paid to ship it overseas. In previous years, similar items sold for



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\$500 or less, she said.

Oregon State University, a pioneer among colleges in Internet auctions, has sold everything from zebra skins from a campus museum to an ultra-light glider used in forestry research.

"For eBay, we narrow it down to stuff that's practical to ship or sell," which does not include typewriters or computers, said Bil Burton, of the university's surplus property office. Many colleges require customers to pick up items to eliminate the hassle of shipping.

Driving for a Classic

Brent Cassity, a general contractor and woodworker, is a two-time buyer from Cal State. He drove about 700 miles from the northern California town of MacArthur to retrieve a \$100 jig saw he wanted for the motor, then again for a \$600 band saw from the 1960s that needed work.

"They don't make either one of them anymore," said Cassity, a lover of old tools, which he said are better made and usually in good shape when coming from a university.

Like Abbey, many college property managers appreciate the control they have over the auction process with eBay. They decide what goes on the block and when, and can keep bidding open for weeks.

Time Consuming for Schools

EBay users usually pay less commission, about 8 percent instead of the 25 percent a liquidator charges to pick up and sell the goods. However, online auctioning is time consuming. It takes an average of three to five hours to list each item and answer bidders' questions, Abbey said.

Though eBay revenue is just a drop in the bucket when it comes to Cal State's \$140 million operating budget, "things like this add up," university spokesman Joe Gutierrez said.

Selling can be technically tricky because schools must comply with regulations that dictate how surplus property is disposed of. Many turn to companies such as PublicSurplus.com and Interschola.com. The companies sell the surplus of schools and other public agencies, and help them comply with state regulations.

Loma Linda University donates its extras to other Seventh-day Adventist schools and overseas missions, medical clinics and hospitals.

"There's always more need than we can supply," spokeswoman Joy Jameson said.

The traditional auction business hasn't suffered because of

online sales, said Bert Jovin, owner of The Liquidation Co. in Fontana, which handles sales for the University of Redlands and Riverside Community College.

"The prices are incredible because of eBay. People buying stuff and trying to resell it has opened up a whole new market," Jovin said. "If nothing else, it's generated publicity about the auction industry and we've gotten a lot of new customers."

UCR contracts with a couple people to handle all aspects of its sales on eBay and labX.com, a site for scientific equipment. The school recently got \$2,900 from the sale of a pizza oven, after the seller took his 35 percent commission.

Dennis Bailey, UCR's equipment manager, likes the arrangement. He doesn't have to worry about shipping or payments, and his one full-time staff person isn't bogged down with listing items and keeping up with what's saleable.

What isn't auctioned online or allocated to other departments is sold at UCR's monthly surplus sale. Last year's monthly sales, including campus vehicles, brought in about \$171,000, and scrap metal generated another \$4,800, Bailey said.

At most colleges, money from sales is returned to the department on campus that provided the item.

Ron Gerhard, business manager for the San Bernardino Community College District, said he is looking into setting up a Web site for the district's two colleges -- San Bernardino Valley and Crafton Hills -- to do what eBay does.

Last year, the schools brought in a combined \$4,500 from surplus sales through a liquidator and scrap. "We're at the mercy of who's present" at local auctions, Gerhard said. "We think there is more money to be had out there."

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