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Going once... going twice...

# SOLD



**Bought at auction.** Mark Liles of West Melbourne, owner of Central Florida Printing, loads up his new Interlake Wire Stitcher after getting it Wednesday afternoon at an auction run by Cliff Shuler, owner of Auctioneers & Liquidators Inc., at Merritt Island Printing Co.

Photo by Craig Rubadoux, FLORIDA TODAY

## With the economy cooling down, the live auction business heats up

BY JOHN McCARTHY  
FLORIDA TODAY

"OK, let's get it started now. Let's get started. How 'bout 50. Do I hear 50? No. OK, you tell me what it's worth. \$25. OK, now we're talking. Twenty-five; 30. Twenty-five; 30. Twenty-five; 30. \$30! Thirty; 35. Thirty; 35..."

And so it went inside a small print shop on Merritt Island on a recent Wednesday afternoon. Auctioneer Mike Farrell, a wireless microphone in hand and a bottle of water jammed in the back pocket of his jeans, made his way from printing presses to binding machines to file cabinets, selling off the contents of a business that had closed its doors.

Business at high-end auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's has dropped significantly as the recession and financial crisis has dampened appetites for \$75 million Monet paintings and

### Auction sales increase since '02

Annual sales at live auctions nationwide have increased more than 37 percent since 2002.



Source: National Auctioneers Association

FLORIDA TODAY



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"A year ago, this guy was a multi-millionaire," Shuler said of the boat's owner. "Now he is selling tools at Sears & Roebuck."

Auctioneers across the country have been reporting an uptick in activity, Chris Longly, spokesman for the National Auctioneers Association, said.

Longly said overall sales at live auctions dipped just less than 1 percent last year. The big drop in high-ticket items was almost completely offset, he said, by the increase in real estate, bankruptcy and business liquidation auctions.

"Are we recession-proof? No," Longly said. "Do we hold up better than others? Yes."

Farrell said it sometimes can be rough at these auctions, when the owners are there, as they were at the print shop auction, watching their items — the tools of their





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Business at high-end auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s has dropped significantly as the recession and financial crisis has dampened appetites for \$75 million Monet paintings and Tiffany chandeliers.

But the recession has pumped up business at smaller auctioneer operations like Farrell’s employer, Cliff Shuler Auctioneers & Liquidators of Titusville.

Shuler said he has been receiving one or two calls a day about selling off assets as part of bankruptcy filings.

“It’s just a sign of the times,” Shuler, a 32-year veteran of the Brevard County auction industry, said.

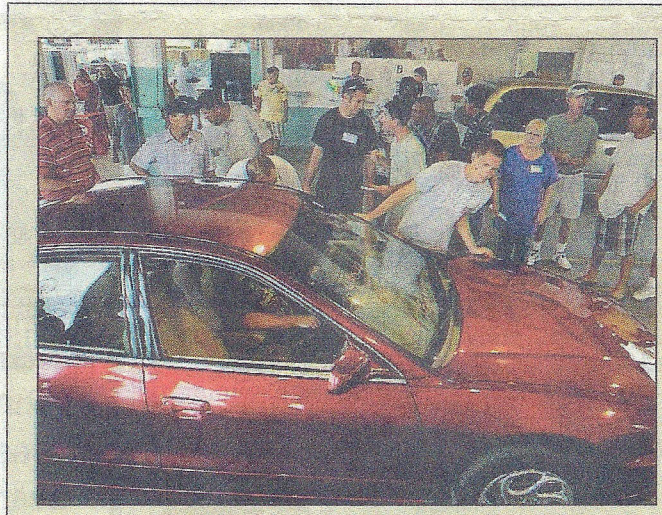
To illustrate the point, he talks about a 38-foot sailboat he’ll auction off as part of a combined bankruptcy and consignment auc-

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Christina Stuart, FLORIDA TODAY

**Dealing wheels.** Brian Witherow of Smith Auto Sales in Sebastian, right center in grey, inspects a car during an auction at Space Coast Automobile Auction in Melbourne on Tuesday. To see a video of the event, go to [www.florida-today.com](http://www.florida-today.com). **STORY, 3E**

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Farrell said it sometimes can be rough at these auctions, when the owners are there, as they were at the print shop auction, watching their items — the tools of their livelihood — being sold off.

“It’s hard,” Farrell said. “It’s tough when they are standing right there watching you.”

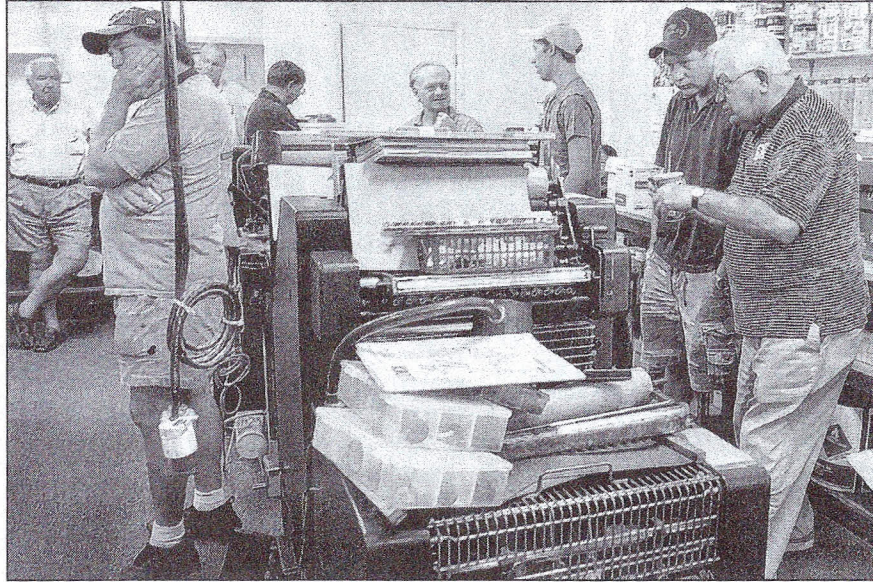
But the losses are somebody else’s gain.

“Those items have to be liquidated,” Longly said. “And it is also the starting point for many entrepreneurs.”

Mark Liles, owner of Central Florida Printing in Melbourne, was one of the bidders at Farrell’s auction, buying a stitching machine for \$200. He said he has been to four or five print shop auctions over the past year and

**See AUCTION, 3E**





Craig Rubadoux, FLORIDA TODAY

**Decisions, decisions.** Potential buyers look over merchandise during an auction put on by Auctioneers & Liquidators Inc. at Merritt Island Printing Co.

# Internet has altered auctions dramatically

## AUCTION, from 1E

has spent about \$10,000 on equipment. He figured those items would have cost him \$30,000 if he bought them outside an auction.

"As long as you don't get into a bidding war, it's a pretty good deal," Liles said.

## Notable changes

Shuler's first experience with auctions was as a young boy attending livestock auctions in rural Indiana.

"The auctioneer usually had a big Cadillac convertible and a big cowboy hat," Shuler said. "When you are 5 years old, that makes a pretty big impression on you."

Still, it wasn't until many years later — after he sold a dive shop he owned in Cocoa Beach — that he earned his auctioneer's license and set up shop.

In the 32 years since, the industry has changed dramatically, Shuler said. Most notable has been the role of computers and the Internet.

Shuler said that every item that comes into his warehouse now gets bar-coded to help with tracking. Items for upcoming auctions are listed with pictures on his Web site, which

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*Auctioneer Cliff Shuler of Titusville, remembering his first experiences with live auctions as a boy*

draws 10,000 hits a week.

He also allows bidders to "pre-register" on his Web site. Once they are in the system, bidders need never again fill out the paperwork necessary to bid at each auction.

When Shuler first set up the system, he expected maybe 100 people would sign up. He is now approaching 1,000, including bidders in Guam and Alaska.

To illustrate how technology has changed the business, he told of some land in upstate New York he recently sold. A New Yorker saw the parcel information on the Web site and delivered the winning bid via telephone, though the auction was held at Shuler's Titusville auction house.

Of course, the Internet also presents online competition, most notably online auction giant eBay.

"You would think people are leaving the live auctions to go online," said Longly. "Actually the reverse is true."

Longly said people have become enamored by auctions because of Web sites like eBay and eventually venture into the more sociable live auctions.

"The No. 1 thing about a live auction is that it is fun," Longly said.

Shuler is using his Web site to promote a Sept. 22 auction, which he bills as "Florida's Largest Consignment/Bankruptcy Auction." Among the items to be sold are a Ferrari, two large boats, a 1931 Model A Ford and a half-dozen Rolex watches.

"It could be the first time we do a million dollars in five or six hours," Shuler said. ■

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