

Crossbred auctioneers



As a rancher I was always told that crossbreeding has many advantages, but while it may be a good thing to cross cattle, it's not usually a good idea to crossbreed auctioneers. Heavy metal auctioneers who sell Caterpillars and cranes aren't the best at selling world class art, and if you want to sell some feeder pigs, the auctioneers at Sotheby's and Christie's aren't necessarily the first people you'd think of to call.

The one exception to my crossbred auctioneer rule are livestock auctioneers; they can sell anything. They are like crossover music artists who can sing both pop and country. Their voices are ambidextrous. They can sell everything from farm equipment, land, art, charity events, real estate and cars. And can they ever motor!

There is one area, however, where livestock auctioneers haven't been employed and that's wine auctions. A friend of mine manages a wine auction and has always been reluctant to hire my cowboy friends to sell it. Then one year she came to me because their wine auction was dying on the vine, so to speak.

I told her it was because the "chant" of the person who sold it consisted of repeating a number over and over again very slowly until everyone was numb. "Put that person on the block at a weekly livestock auction and he'd be laughed out of the place," I said. "Anyone who can't say, 'Around and round the rough and rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran,' real fast at least three times in a row real fast doesn't deserve to call themselves an auctioneer."

"Do you really think your cowboy friends can sell wine?" she desperately asked.

"Of course, they can. I know your concerns have always been that cowboys don't know that much about wine, but product knowledge can be overrated," I said. "I'll just tutor my auctioneer friend and I'll bring along a couple of my buddies to take bids."

My buddy needed more tutoring than I thought. He thinks “tannin” is what you do to leather, or on the beach, and he wouldn't know the difference between a Cabernet and a cabbage worm. I made up flash cards with difficult wine words to say, such as pee-no, mur-low, Gall-lo and wine-o, and told him the right way to say “caumeur” is “cow manure.”

I also told him, “In describing a wine, just pick out a person you know and describe that person. For example, a wine might be ‘pretentious yet mellow,’ or ‘deep and bold.’ Kind of like me.”

We showed up for the auction in cowboy hats and boots and brought the house down. One bottle brought more than the mortgage on my first house. If I drank the wine we sold, at the prices we did, I wouldn't use the restroom for a year. It would be like pouring money away and flushing it down the toilet. They didn't even mind that the auctioneer took my advice and described one wine as “arrogant and dense,” and another had “a long nose, could stink on occasion, and was nuttier than an Almond Joy.” (I only hope he wasn't describing me.)

We ended up doubling the previous year's gross and they gave each of us a bottle of wine as a tip to show their appreciation. I put the bottle in my wine cellar, which now consisted of one bottle of wine, and when some people we don't like invited us to a housewarming party I went to my cellar, retrieved the free bottle of booze and gave it as a gift. It was akin to “regifting” presents at Christmas.

From then on the folks we gave the bottle to acted like our new best friends, inviting us to family weddings, funerals and graduations. Even though they'd hardly spoken to us before, they now wanted us to be their Facebook friends. I was wondering why the change of heart when one day the “friends” blurted out that it's not every day someone gives you a \$500 bottle of wine as a housewarming gift!

I tried not to scream, or change facial expressions, but my wife said the only other time she'd seen that look on my face was when a tour guide informed us that we'd just eaten fried monkey organs.

It's the Pitts

Written by Lee Pitts
