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On the cover:

A Demag AC30 owned by NMT lifts an aircraft engine into position at Luton Airport.



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c&a comment



In early January Martin Ainscough, of the Ainscough crane hire family, announced the launch of the UK's first on-line rental auction site. The idea is that someone wishing to rent a crane, telehandler, aerial lift or just about anything, registers on the site and posts their requirement. That enquiry is then directed to any supplier who has registered to provide that product in that particular area.

Those suppliers can then bid anonymously for the work and the lowest bid will be accepted - rather like e-Bay in reverse.

Reaction to the news from other hirers has ranged from negative to incredulous. We have heard comments along the lines of: "is the man crazy?" and "what does he think he is playing at?"

Love him or hate him, Martin Ainscough is not one to dive in at the deep end without having a careful look first, nor is he one to part with his money on a whim. So what possible reasons could one of the UK's most successful crane hire men have for diving into a venture which to some of the sharpest marketing and business minds in the UK equipment rental industry appears to be a pure folly? The fear of course is that the venture will turn every rental into an on-line 'haggle-fest', dragging down rental rates and setting low-price checks for contractors to use to beat up their rental suppliers.

However, auctions can go either way; works of art and collectables, not to mention mobile phone and broadcasting licences, are sold via auction in order to achieve the best prices. Many people obtain great prices on e-bay for stuff they would otherwise throw away. The difference here, though, is that it is the seller, rather than the buyer, who is bidding.

The specialist rental industry can hardly be held up as a beacon of intelligent pricing: a savvy buyer already holds his own auction among suppliers. The problem for the hirer is he has to take the buyer's word for the competitive prices he claims to have been offered or call his bluff. In an open on-line bidding process at least you can see for certain what others have quoted. It might be surprising to see how many of those crazy offers are a figment of the buyer's imagination?

When business is good and no one has an interest in making a stupid offer, perhaps it will establish positive benchmarks, giving hirers the confidence to shift rates upwards?

On balance we should not be too quick to pass judgement on Ainscough - this venture might just have the opposite effect to what most observers imagine. Perhaps greater visibility of what companies are prepared to do in terms of price will sharpen the industry up. The biggest challenge will be to attract enough serious users to the site.

No matter what your view, it is something new and innovative and should have no effect on a well-run operation, apart from providing more information... which is no bad thing.

Leigh W Sparrow

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