

Sector : Insurance & Real Estate
Year of Establishment : 1982
Number of Employees : 3
Website : www.fureys.ie



“Digitalization in Insurance and Auctioneer Services”

FUREY INSURANCE

“Our first online auction resulted in the highest price ever paid for agricultural land in our region” - Dara Furey

Crisis:

Customer Engagement & Conduct of Business-as-Usual

About

The Furey family has been providing property and insurance services to the Inishowen Peninsula, Donegal and throughout Ireland since 1982. The business was founded by Sean Furey in 1982 and was the first of its kind in Inishowen, offering various financial services to the community. In this, an insurance broker and auctioneer run side by side. Sean Furey Insurances Limited is regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland as a general insurance broker. They offer all types of general insurance and provide a bespoke service to both personal and business customers large and small. They have found a niche market in serving customers who like to do business with a trusted local source instead of an impersonal website. Sean Furey Insurances Limited have a commitment to education and continuous professional development.

Sean Furey Auctioneers is Inishowen’s premier estate agent and is licensed and run by Dara Furey who has 23 years of experience in the industry. He provides an expert, professional and versatile service which includes selling, buying, advising and valuation in the county of Donegal. The service is experience and qualification based – Dara holds two degrees as well as various auctioneering and valuation certificates and diplomas. Dara is

an elected member of the Ulster Council of the Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers (IPAV) and advises estate agents and auctioneers on various issues throughout Donegal, Ulster and Ireland. This appointment is held by only two auctioneers/estate agents in Ulster. He is also a member of the European Association of Real Estate Professions (CEPI). As a Commissioner for Oaths, which is an appointment by the Supreme Court of Ireland, Dara is authorised to administer oaths for various purposes.

Background

During the pandemic the Insurance brokers were deemed an essential service, so the offices remained open for people to come in physically. However, the Auctioneers side of the business was changed significantly. The Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers (IPAV) issued directives to all their members that no onsite valuations or property viewings were to take place. Additionally, no in person auctions were to take place. Traditionally these events were held either onsite at the property being auctioned or in a local hotel. As Inishowen, in Northern Donegal, is a predominantly rural area, a large portion of the prospective buyers would not have been operating online. The lockdowns in Ireland essentially stopped this side of the business from operating unless changes were made and the company adapted to the crisis to ensure business continuity and maintain an essential element of the organisation's revenue.

Digital Tools

Online Auction Platform: **Offr.io**

Instant Messaging: **WhatsApp,**
Messenger

Other: **eBanking**



Methodology

In-person viewings of property have always been a key part of the role of a successful estate agent. While there are companies that offer bespoke virtual tour solutions to facilitate this, Dara found that using the video messaging tools that people were familiar with, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger worked well. This way he could use a smartphone

to deliver a virtual tour to prospective buyers. Showing them around a property, and they could also ask questions live - which meant they would be answered by a human expert rather than a chatbot. An element of selling is the rapport and trust built by the estate agent with the client. The only way to achieve this is to enable communication in real time with the agent. This led to a number of properties being sold during the pandemic, but only in limited amounts, as very few buyers want to actually buy something of such high value without actually seeing it in person.

The move to an online auction solution was considered very significant for the region. While in other parts of the world, and in large cities, people may be familiar with this method, it was not the case in Donegal. Many of the auctions are conducted for the sale of agricultural land. Prospective buyers are often farmers, many of whom are not familiar with and do not use digital tools. The first event, and most notable example for the organisation, was an online auction that took place in September 2020. A Dublin-based startup company call Offr.io had created an online auction solution which was utilised by Sean Furey Auctioneers in its first auction since the pandemic began (six months). Dara reported that there was a significant amount of work in the lead up to the auction to educate the prospective bidders in how the process worked and also coordination between the website hosts to deal with the expected upcoming surge in online traffic, the online payment providers and offr.ie. While the auction was in process, Fureys.ie website was overloaded with traffic and experienced an outage, however due to a strong SLA between Fureys and the hosting company, it was back online in six minutes. Interestingly, many non-buyers also logged on to watch the event, fascinated by the concept of an 'online property auction'.

The auction itself was not only a success but actually set a record for the highest price ever paid for agricultural land in the county of Donegal. This made the headlines in the local and national newspapers. Thus, the move to an online auction was of huge benefit to the company in terms of positive exposure for Fureys and was equated to free advertising. Overall sales from the auction equated to 1.5 million euro worth of land sold which was the second highest value of land by auction for Sean Furey Auctioneers, only topped by a sale during the Celtic Tiger years (financial boom of the early 2000s).

Conclusion

With the success of the first online auction, the company has continued to offer this solution throughout the pandemic. The solution prevents government restrictions from impacting the organisation's ability to conduct business as usual. Unforeseen benefits are also that this solution is more convenient for non-local buyers and therefore opens the market considerably nationally and potentially internationally. The organisation has conducted several online auctions since, with all properties sold and a 100% success rate. The main disadvantage has been that the website has crashed every time an online auction has been held, so this indicates that a solution is only as good as the weakest link in its chain. The company has identified a need to change their website provider as the inefficiency has the potential to negatively impact business and trade.

The company also continues to provide virtual tours via messaging applications, as this allows for unrestricted viewings and also opens the market to non-local buyers. It also opens the door to opportunity, as potential buyers may initially view a property with little effort. If they are interested, they can then arrange to view the property in person. While these tools have proven to be useful and allowed the company to continue trading, Dara commented that they are only another tool to generate business there are no guarantees and much preparation is required. Another current drawback with online auction tools is the associated stigma in Ireland. Online auctions were used extensively after the financial crash to sell property that had been repossessed. The extension of this drawback is that some buyers associate online auctions as a way to buy something cheaply. This distorted image of online auctions had to be managed via communication with buyers prior to the auction and is still a key part of any sale. Customer relations are highly important and these solutions do not replace face to face contact, which is essential. However, they do augment it and in times of crisis they can be utilized for business continuity purposes.