

BUSINESS: How real are reality TV finds?

Stouffville facility set to host own 'storage wars'

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How real is reality TV? In the hugely popular genre, shows include talent, survival and travel competitions, dirty and dangerous jobs, crime and punishment, pawn shops and now, bidding on the contents of delinquent storage lockers.

Storage Wars, a second-season A&E TV series, is just that.

York Region storage professionals are divided on whether it's manufactured melodrama or a real-world depiction of their enterprises.

The consensus, however, is that the program has spawned massive interest in storage auctions.

The top-rated non-fiction show for 2010, according to USA Today, with an average 2.4 million viewers, shadows bidders at storage content auctions in California and Nevada.

The buyers are afforded a five-minute look-but-don't-touch inspection. The goal is to turn a profit on the items in lockers whose owners have defaulted on rental fees.

The ethereal magnet, local storage managers believe, is the lure of hidden treasure.

"That's the hope, definitely," Sentinel Self Storage site manager Josephine Rahim said.

Storage Wars has had a huge impact on the industry, including her 550-unit Whitchurch-Stouffville facility.

So much so, that on Nov. 9, Sentinel will hold its first contents auction. Four units at the facility, at Stouffville and Kennedy roads, have defaulted on rent, despite management's best efforts to assist clients.

"There's been lots of interest and inquires," she said. "Auctioning units is fairly new and we're adapting. The recovery goes to pay rent and administration costs. It's the last thing we want, but it's a way to get past-due accounts."

A fan of reality TV, mostly in the home and garden category, Ms Rahim likes Stor-

age Wars.

"Yes, it's real," she said. "I'm just not sure what kind or how many units they go through before they find vintage or valuable items."

Most viewers of reality programming suspend disbelief to a degree.

Concord-based Sherlock Self Storage manager Ryan Lad views Storage Wars as fabricated.

"It's all fake," he said. "It's definitely staged. I don't understand how you can pay thousands for contents and make it back. Frankly, most people store junk."

He admits the show has generated interest and calls to his 300-unit facility, but he remains incredulous how the program's principal bidders continually unearth valuable items, have a platoon of expert appraisers and claim to make profits, yet never show the viewer how and for how much they resell the goods.

Sherlock attempted to hold auctions on abandoned units in the past, but no one showed up, Mr. Lad said.

"Besides, we just don't have many delinquencies," he said.

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Josephine Rahim
Stouffville Sentinel Self Storage site manager

The 340 units at Edward St. Self Storage in Aurora are consistently 90 per cent rented and there have been less than two defaults in the past year, manager Lucy Rus said.

Prior to Storage Wars, interest was in rentals. Now, it includes auctions.

"We get a lot of calls, but for me to hold an auction, we'd need three or four units. We don't have those defaults and honestly, when we do, there's nothing worthwhile."

Ms Rus has seen the show and gives pro-



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Edward St. Self Storage manager Lucy Rus shows one of the units at the facility. The Aurora business doesn't have enough customers who default on payments to make contents auctions worthwhile, she said. A Whitchurch-Stouffville company is hosting an auction Wednesday.

ducers the benefit of the doubt.

"It's popular because in the (United) States, they have storage businesses like we have Tim Hortons," she said. "In my opinion, the show is reality, but they never say how many units they went through to find a good one and what they actually got for items."

She also contests the show's stated profit margins because the cost of removing goods isn't factored in. Some suspect producers of staging contents.

"I wouldn't be surprised," she said.

Her assistant, Andrew Stewart, 28, agreed. He's not a fan of the show or the genre.

"It's not reality," the Aurora resident said. "It's scripted. Reality TV is a waste on our generation. It eliminates imagination and is an insult to viewers."

"It's been great for business, though. It's made people aware."

Typically, people rent storage units because of changes in their marital or household circumstances, Mr. Stewart said. Divorce is a big factor, as is downsizing or staging a home for sale.

The reasons people default on units vary as well, Advantage Self Storage operations manager and Aurora resident Brandon Schad said. Renters die, are in prison, have no next of kin or their emergency contacts can't be reached. Or, they've run out of financial options.

Mr. Schad manages four Ontario locations and a total of 2,000 storage units.

"Personally, I like the show," he said. "They feature the best of the bunch. Not every unit has treasure. They film that one in 100 units that has the wow factor."

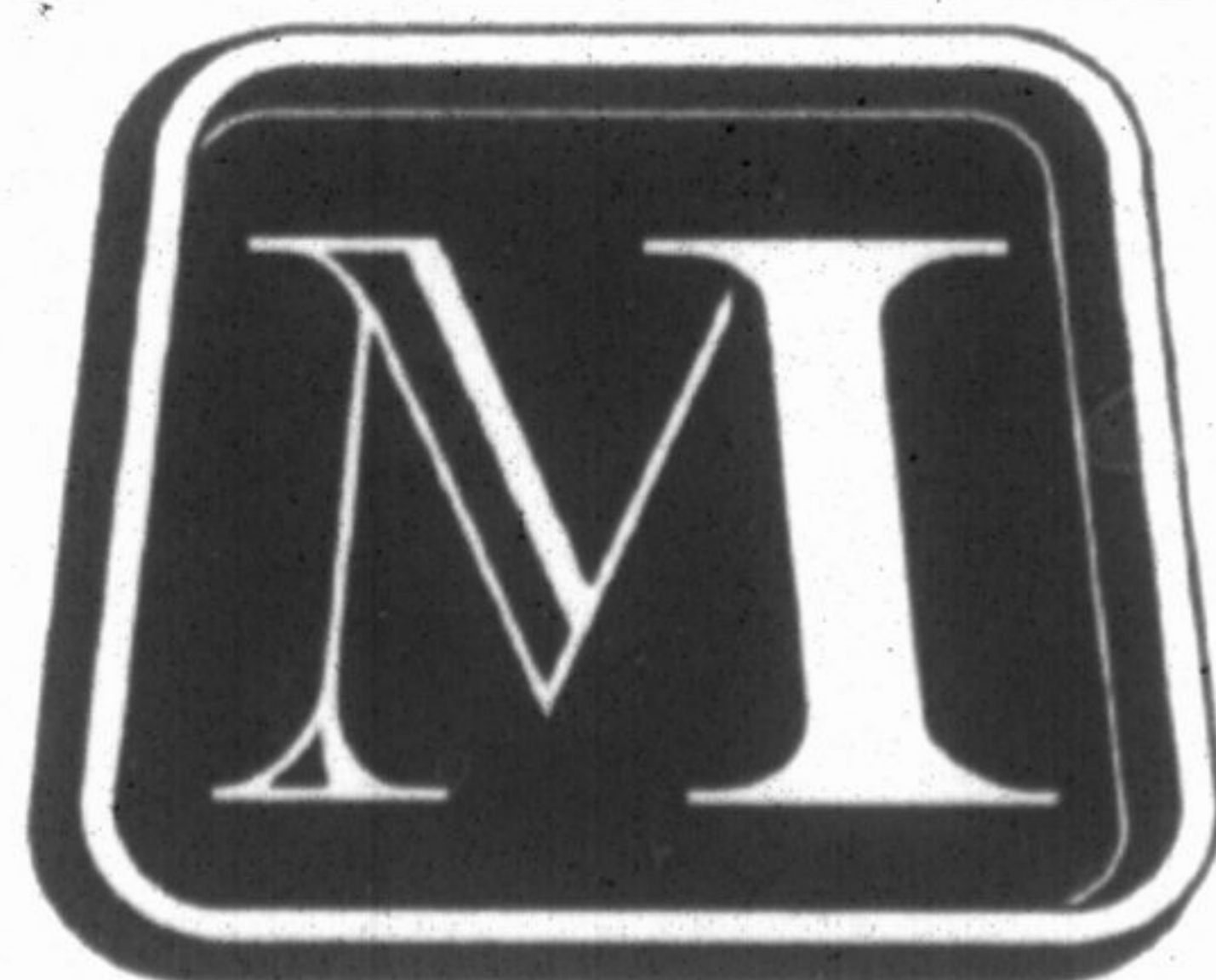
Advantage holds content auctions and runs them akin to Storage Wars, he said. Prior to the show airing, he had an average of four bidders. Now, more than 50 people attend his auctions.

The storage auction concept is legitimate, he said. Prizes abound. At his Barrie location, a 5-square-foot unit yielded the winning bidder three locked boxes containing vintage comic books "worth a fortune". At his Scarborough site, a unit contained a cache of 40 valuable arcade games.

Anecdotal, Mr. Schad has heard of content oddities, including full cremation urns and a Toronto unit in which police recovered 120 silver bars worth \$10,000 each.

"Normally, units have household items," he said. "Still, the show has been incredible for us."

For more on Sentinel in Stouffville, visit www.sentinel.ca/en/ontario-self-storage/stouffville-self-storage/



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