Garage Sales: Cash, Not Trash

Guide G-106

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Cooperative Extension Service • College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences

INTRODUCTION

If your home is bursting at the seams with little-used possessions, but you hate to think of throwing or giving them away, a garage sale could be the answer. A garage sale is a chance to clean out your garage and closets and earn some cash at the same time. But don't fool yourself by thinking this is an easy project. People who profit from garage sales work hard for every cent they earn. A successful garage sale requires extensive considerations and planning. Issues related to garage sales can be divided into garage sale considerations, the garage sale event, and its aftermath.

CONSIDERATIONS

Just because you have potential items does not mean you have to conduct a garage sale. When looking into the following considerations, keep in mind that there are alternatives to garage sales: selling items online (e.g., eBay, Craigslist), selling items at a flea market, or donating your items to thrift stores (e.g., Goodwill, Salvation Army) or churches.

Are You Strong Enough?

Physically strong. Before you start piling your slightly used but still good items on your lawn or throw open the garage door and shout *Sale!*, you should consider whether you are the kind of person who can handle a sale. Are you physically strong enough to lift and carry all those clothes, toys, books, and appliances?

Mentally strong. Can you convince family members to part with their treasures? Are you persuasive enough to convince your family to participate in the work? Can you deal with crowds of people swarming over your property and making less-than-complimentary remarks about the merchandise? If you thrive on hard work and a challenge and aren't too sensitive to people's comments, you can probably handle a garage sale.

If your major obstacle to a garage sale is a lack of physical strength or physical disability, consider asking a friend to share the heavy work and the profits. If you involve another person, or have a multi-family sale, make sure everyone agrees in advance on the division of labor and profits. Too often one person does all the work and everyone shares in the proceeds equally. Don't let this happen to you.

The Right Place

Location, location, location. Another question to ask yourself is, "Do I have a good location for a sale?" Ideal locations are in centrally located neighborhoods in town. Shoppers should be able to find your place on a city map.

If you live 50 miles from the next ranch, you can't expect the kind of crowds that spell success. On the other hand, even if you live in a busy apartment complex, you may not be allowed by management to have a sale in the parking lot.

Once again, a friend or friends could be the answer. Their homes may be better suited, so a multi-family sale away from your home could work for everyone.

Know the Law

Check for special ordinances governing garage sales. Can you put signs up in the street? Do you need a permit for a sale? Are there regulations about hours for the sale? In some areas, the number of garage sales you can have in a year is set—be sure to check if you plan to have more than one!

Check with Your Neighbors

Even if you can have a garage sale by law, you should check with your next-door neighbors to make sure they won't object. At the least, a garage sale causes parking problems and noise, but many times neighbors won't mind and may even come over to see what's for sale.

The Right Stuff

If you're up to your ears in priceless antiques, a garage sale is not the best place to sell them. Big, expensive, and antique items, such as that 1979 like-new station wagon, are best sold via auction houses, antique dealers, eBay, or Craigslist. But if you have old dishes, toys, small appliances, clothes, games, sports equipment, and

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books, you probably have the right stuff. If you're not sure about the value of an item, get an appraisal or put it aside until you have time to check on it. If you decide to sell your lesser-quality jewelry at your garage sale, use a magnifying glass to look for a karat or sterling mark before you put it in the sale box.

THE GARAGE SALE EVENT

Now that you've decided to have a garage sale, you need to plan for it. A well-planned garage sale may require up to three weeks of planning.

Timing Your Sale

The best time to have a sale is spring through fall; bad weather can keep people at home in winter. You should always consider the weather, though, and have alternative plans if the weather turns foul.

Weekends are better than weekdays for a sale, with the exception of Fridays. Fridays are popular sale days in many communities. Two-day sales can be attractive if you have lots of merchandise to sell.

Dedicated garage sale shoppers get up early, so expect the biggest crowds at 8 a.m. or even earlier. Afternoons seem to drag at garage sales, so consider an 8 a.m. to noon sale on Friday and Saturday, for instance. Sundays are generally poor days for sales.

Just after payday is a shrewd time for a sale, and just before college or public school classes begin in the fall is also a time when buyers are looking for bargains.

Some people like to use gimmicks such as a surprise grab bag for a quarter. Consider letting your children sell their own things and keep the money.

Pricing Items and Handling Money

Price to sell. Price everything, or at least know that all men's pants, for instance, are the same price. Proper pricing methods can make the difference between a well-ordered sale and chaos. If prices are set, you won't have to make spur-of-the-moment pricing decisions during the rush of the sale. Use a marker of unusual color so prices can't be changed.

Attend other garage sales to get an idea of what to charge. You don't want to be out of line from the norm. Be honest—price a broken toaster lower than a like-new one, and if an item is broken, say so on the price tag.

It's a good idea never to price items below 25 cents. You can group small items so they total at least 25 cents; that way it is easy to make change.

Some shoppers will try to barter. Before the sale begins, you should decide whether you will take less than the marked prices. You may want to stick to your prices the first two hours or so of the sale, and then come down a little when traffic thins.

Figure 1. **Different-colored price stickers make it easy to track sales in a multi-family garage sale.**
(Photo by Flickr user Chiot's Run. http://www.flickr.com/photos/chiotsrun/3923018491/)

Price display. Many people have found that masking tape or peel-off stickers work well for most items from clothing to appliances, or you can staple prices to items when possible.

If you are having a multi-family sale, you can use different-colored price stickers (Figure 1). When someone buys an item, peel off the sticker and put it on a sheet of notebook paper designated for that family. Be sure to indicate if the price was changed. At the end of the sale, stickers should reflect the sales made by each family. Make sure everyone understands the system ahead of time.

Cash box. Having a cash box for your garage sale has its pros and cons. Having all the money in your wallet or pocket while stashing away the large bills in the house may be the safest way to guard your cash. If you decide to go with a cash box, get one with a lid. NEVER LEAVE THE CASH BOX UNATTENDED. As the day progresses, don't let the money build up in the cash box. Take proceeds into the house and keep only $30 or $40 in the box. You can improvise a cash box from a shoebox, cigar box, or tackle box if necessary. Have a calculator, pencils, scratch pad, and record-keeping materials on hand.

Exercise precautions. Your household safety comes first. You should take precautions such as keeping a watch on items (including cash), transferring large bills from the cash box to your house, placing valuable items closer to the garage, and not letting strangers enter the house—even to use the bathroom.

Prepare Yourself

Categories. Organizing your items into categories can help you keep track of them, but items won't organize themselves. You can expect to spend several days preparing for the sale. Enlist your family's help.

Arrangements. Think like a store retailer! Make sure you have plenty of space to display your items. Arrange to borrow tables, if needed. You will need a clothesline or racks for clothing and probably extra hangers. Hanging clothes keeps items from being unfolded and jumbled in a pile.

Allow plenty of space for people to move about and browse. Crowding causes confusion. Arrange for electrical outlets or an extension cord to be available so appliances can be tested.

Mark items in your garage or yard that are not for sale. If necessary, cover these items with sheets, drop cloths, or tarps. Move small items to your back yard or into the house.

You can hang items on a fence or place them along your driveway. Put books, binding up, in cardboard boxes. If you or a friend has a knack for displaying items, use it to your advantage.

If you have quite a bit of clothing, you might consider partitioning off a corner of your garage for people to try on clothes. Provide a mirror. Do not allow them to enter your house.

Grouping. It's useful for shoppers if items are grouped. Place children's clothes or toys together, for instance, and kitchenware in another area. Boxes keep small items from getting lost among other things.

If you have toys for sale, put them in a box on the ground for children to play with. This keeps children busy and also helps sell the toys. Some people pick up toys at other sales to have on hand to keep children occupied. Be sure they are priced.

Spread the Word

So you are strong enough, your family and friends will participate, and you have a great location and an amazing assortment of items. You have chosen a date and checked out city ordinances. Now you need to advertise.

If your house is hard to find, include directions in the ad. Don't put your phone number in the ad unless you are willing to answer many phone calls. Be prepared for callers who want to come for a preview.

Write a catchy ad, but not one that is too cute. Be sure to include the dates, times, and place for the sale. Tell people what kinds of items you have, especially the attractive ones. If given more space (e.g., online ads), you may want to add items' prices, units, pictures, and dimensions.

An ad might read: "Follow the signs to 225 Yucca (corner of Payne) July 11 and 12 for the sale you've been waiting for. Like-new toys, baby clothes, linens, books, fishing and ski equipment, crutches, plus much more. Reasonable prices. 8 a.m. to noon both days."

Online ads. Craiglist is arguably the most popular and easiest way to advertise your garage sale locally. Craiglist has the advantage of being locally based (e.g., there are individual Craigslist pages for Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Las Cruces, El Paso, etc.) and having a "garage sale" subcategory. If you have unique or big-ticket items, you can also advertise under their respective categories (e.g., antiques, collectibles, furniture, bikes). Other online mediums are Facebook postings, email listservs, and online newspapers.

Local newspapers. Local newspapers' classified sections are great places to tell people you'll be open for business. Don't just advertise in your daily newspaper; place ads in the weekly newspapers and shoppers that serve your town. Check newspaper deadlines for placing ads so you are sure to get yours there on time.

Flyers. You may also post flyers (with permission, of course) in supermarkets, coffee shops, churches, laundromats—any place with a bulletin board in your community.

Local radio. Radio stations will sometimes run a public service announcement the day of your sale. Ask them.

Word of mouth. Word of mouth helps, too. Announce your sale to friends and, if permissible, at meetings of organizations to which you belong. Many people love garage sales and will be eager to come to yours. Don't neglect to tell them about it.

Road signs. On the day of the sale, put up signs pointing toward your house from main streets in town. Make the signs colorful, and put your address on them in big letters and numbers.

Be a Step Ahead

Start early. Be an early bird yourself on the day of your sale. Don't underestimate the amount of time it will take to set up the sale. Do as much the night before as you can and have everything ready to set out just before the sale begins.

Team up. Don't try to handle a garage sale alone. You will be overwhelmed at times answering questions and taking money. In general, the more people who are available to help you, the better. Be sure everyone knows his or her job.

Don't try to be your own babysitter and run a sale at the same time. If necessary, have a babysitter for your small children.

Prepare for the slow times. Stock the refrigerator in advance with refreshments for everyone helping at the sale. A typical sale has busy times and lulls. Have a book, radio, or checkerboard on hand (marked "Not For Sale") for idle moments.

Figure 2. **Balloons and colorful signs are examples of eye-catching pizzazz that can help draw customers.** (Photo by Flickr user Eric Parker. http://www.flickr.com/photos/ericparker/5750571571/)

Add Pizzazz

Some experienced sellers like to add a little flair or some traffic-stopping touches on signs and at the site, such as balloons or streamers (Figure 2). Election hats, barbecue aprons, or other apparel can be worn to identify yourself and your assistants as the people in charge.

A large half-price sign can be put up when sales lag and you are ready to clear out the last items. Most experts agree serving refreshments is far more trouble than it is worth, but children might have fun with a lemonade stand if you can cope with that and the sale, too.

Early Birds

Yes vs. no. Decide in advance what to do about early birds. It's up to you whether to let them shop early or not. There are two schools of thought on this. The sticklers say the opening time should be advertised and everyone should abide by it. Others say an early buyer is a serious buyer.

If someone comes asking to see a specific item you have advertised, he or she could be the only person interested in that item all day. Saying no—especially if it is a big item—could mean no sale. But if early birds ask to see everything at the sale ahead of time, you might want to refuse. The important thing is to be prepared. Expect secondhand shop owners to arrive early looking for items they can resell.

THE AFTERMATH

Do not expect to sell everything. You will have some leftover items. You should continue to find other avenues to sell your big-ticket items. Keep on advertising these items, or you can give them to a charity or to friends, keep them, or throw them away. Some charitable organizations will pick up your leftover items and give you a receipt so you can claim a tax deduction.

It will take some time to clean up the lawn, patio, driveway, and garage and pack up everything. You may want to arrange in advance for extra help with this job.

Be sure to take the signs down when the sale is over. Some communities fine people who do not remove their garage sale signs promptly.

Then it is time to perform the most enjoyable task of the day—counting your profits.

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Revised August 2014 **Las Cruces, NM**