

Consumer Newsletter – December 2017

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Estate Sales: Quick Way to Purge, Put Cash in Your Pocket

Purging your house of clutter and depersonalizing the space is one of the first recommendations a real estate professional makes before listing a property.

In addition to getting your house ready to shine, the process also helps you pare down the amount of stuff you need to pack, which makes your eventual move easier.

But when your house is loaded with decade's worth of stuff, that purge can be a bit daunting.

And you can't really count on kids to take your bone china or French provincial furniture off your hands. Younger generations, particularly Millennials, often don't want hand-me-downs.

"No one wants to take anything. The next generation has full houses and different taste," says Josh Horowitz, president Sell My Stuff Canada (<http://bit.ly/2zXYnL2>), a Toronto-based

estate sale company. "Often they'll take one or two items and ask us to sell the rest."

Brad Ruby, owner of Ampersand Estate Sales (<http://bit.ly/2z4fObm>), Chicago, Ill., also has found an increasingly unsentimental audience among those selling off their parents' estates. People frequently leave behind what some would consider extremely personal and sentimental items, including family bibles and photographs. And forget about collectibles. "No one wants things like Hummel or Lladro collections," he observes.

Lifetime of Stuff Gone in a Weekend

Those are some reasons homeowners look to estate sales when they're downsizing or it's time for a purge after someone dies.

Estate sale companies can step in and sell off a household's goods in a weekend.

The advantage people see is the ability to get rid of their things quickly, make some money, and not have to sift through and find new homes for every

object. "That can be an ordeal," comments Horowitz.

Top Dollar

Experienced estate sale companies also have appraisers they can tap who have expertise in areas like furniture, collectibles, jewelry, and so forth, so you're not giving away valuables for a song.

Everyone has heard stories about someone who bought a painting for \$6 at a garage sale only to discover that it's worth \$20,000. "We can call in technical support so you're not selling grandma's sapphire and gold ring for \$1," says Ruby.

Some of the other services estate sale companies bring, include:

- Photographing and promoting the items they know will draw the most buyers.
- Advertising to their sphere of contacts. Horowitz, for example, says he has a customer base of 10,000 people in Toronto.
- Connecting with antique dealers and collectors who are interested in unique pieces that may not appeal to a wide audience.
- Remaining impartial and negotiating with buyers to cut a deal. That can be especially helpful when you have hard-to-sell items. "It's better to get 30 cents on the dollar than to donate something or throw it away," says Ruby.

Before the Purge

Is your house a candidate for such a sale?

Volume is key and it's often easier to draw crowds when a house is packed with stuff versus when it's a minimalist property with a few hundred items. Why? "People still enjoy the hunt," Horowitz says.

Ruby seeks opportunities for vertical marketing, meaning that he's looking for homes with a wide mix of items—furniture, clothes, shoes, records, flatware, dishes, small kitchen appliances, knick-knacks, garden tools, and so forth.

And, recommends Rhonda Hunnicutt, don't toss anything unless it's truly garbage. You may consider a half-used bottle of Windex trash, but Hunnicutt, founder and owner of DFW Pre-Demolition and Estate Sales, Dallas, Texas (<http://bit.ly/2zj6zbj>), says that cleaning crews often come to sales to buy cleaning supplies cheaply.

"In an ideal world, we want to come in and see the house and goods before the purge," says Ruby.

Choosing a Company

Here are some things to understand when you're considering an estate sale and choosing a company to manage it:

- Visit a company's sales to see how well they're run and check references.

- Ask about a company's experience and how many estate sales they do each year. "If someone is doing five sales a year, it's a hobby," says Ruby. "You want someone with experience who's working in the business and seeing items on a daily basis."
- Ask about how they determine pricing, particularly on your valuable items. Be certain the company can tap appraisers to assess the value of unique items in your collection.
- Ask about commissions. The most common commission charged by estate sale companies is 35%, according to a study (<http://bit.ly/2zWyEIP>) by EstateSales.org. That figure can vary depending on things like your location, the other services a company offers – a full cleanout and trash removal at the conclusion of a sale, for example – and how much a sales grosses.
- Be sure the company is insured
- Be certain you're comfortable with the person and you trust him or her. "If you feel that someone is even a bit slimy or they rub you the wrong way, find someone else," says Horowitz. After all, you're entrusting that person with your life's treasures. In addition, there's lots of cash being exchanged and you want to

know that the company will be honest about how much money has come in.

- Stay away from the sale. It's often too emotional to see people picking through your treasures and haggling on their price.
- If you're hiring a company to conduct a sale at a relative's house, let the sales manager know if your parents or aunt may have hidden money. They can look for it. Ruby found \$50,000 in cash in one house and unearthed \$22,000 sitting in a file cabinet that was under a staircase among a bunch of junk.

And if you're about to list your home for sale, an estate sale just may bring in a buyer. More than once, Horowitz found estate sale shoppers expressing interest in buying the house.

"On the first day of a sale, we often have 100 people lined up on the driveway waiting to get in," says Horowitz. It's something of a giant open house. "It's a great way to kill two birds with one stone," he adds.

Here are four places to find estate sales and estate sale managers.

- Estatesale.com
- estatesales.org
- Estatesales.net
- Megaestatesales.com

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