

## AGE, POSITIONING, & CONTROL IN GARAGE SALES & AUCTIONS

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Economists are not enthusiastic about studying the secondhand goods exchange sector of the economy, but we can argue for its study on the basis of common sense observation. More pre-owned than new houses are bought or rented. The same is true for the purchase of secondhand automobiles, motorcycles, and boats, adult bicycles, and perhaps for purchases of large scale farm equipment, now almost prohibitive in cost to family farm operators.

To these major categories we can add 1) antiques, collectibles, objets d'art, jewels, decorative items and books in the realm of the cultural and esthetic; 2) household goods including furniture, appliances and other useful objects such as garden implements and tools; and 3) clothing, personal accessories, linens and bedding. This list is not exhaustive, but it suggests the range of the sales and exchanges which pervade most people's accumulation and divestment of their material goods.

### GARAGE SALES

The continuous acquisition of material goods produces for many a glut of things people are not much interested in keeping. To relieve the pressure of over-accumulation, they increasingly resort to garage, yard, and patio sales. These provide a different and more socially positive form of relief than that which comes through devaluation of ownership of mass produced property followed by outright discard. Since the discard of only partially used possessions often produces discomfort, regret, or guilt, the garage sale expedient serves both to recycle useful goods and provides some personal gratification to the seller, who does not have to bear the onus of throwing away useful goods.

Donation to charitable organizations provides another alternative to discard, but as the economy falters and inflation rises, it is apparently more sensible and compelling for persons with goods they want to surrender to recoup at least a portion of their cost through some form of sale. Another limiting factor is the selectivity of charitable organizations. The collection container at the edge of a super-market lot imposes physical limits on what

may be donated. House calls for donation of castoffs seem to be waning. It is also apparent that along with smaller objects to be sold at give-away prices in garage sales, increasingly expensive items are now being included, such as the sixty-dollar sheepskin jacket, the electric typewriter, and washer dryer combinations.

Garage sales are neither a popular fad nor part of the epiphenomena of modern American society. Without counting pre-owned house and auto sales, there are at least 1.5 million sales per year with at least 150 million dollars exchanging hands for goods with a utilization value at least twice that amount.

### PSYCHO-SOCIAL ASPECTS

Garage, patio, yard, and other such sales are carried out by amateurs in settings of minimum strain, stress, and anxiety – at least for the potential buyer. One is free to drop by for minute or a half-hour without uneasiness about time. Sales pressure and the obligation to purchase which may be felt in stores and shops is virtually absent. The seller's demeanor is one of restrained hopefulness. It would be "nice" if the objects were bought, but there is no pitch, or at most there may be a very mild urging to buy a particular object. More likely, the seller will want only to reinforce the apparent "good buy" as indicated by the price mark, in most cases, a piece of masking tape stuck to the object for sale.

With sales pressure at a minimum, and freedom to look over, feel, examine for flaws, or amount of use apparently left in the object, the garage sale shopper of any age finds it easy to expand the chance for sociability and enjoyment of the virtually stress-free social setting. Most often garage sale shoppers come in pairs, a husband and wife, or two same-sex friends. Family groups also participate. The weekend garage sales draw a variety of persons in various ways. Early birds looking for choice bargains come often long before the announced opening. Lower socioeconomic class persons and women from the black community are the earliest arrivals, and they may stay the shortest time, for they usually know exactly what they want, and are will-

ing to visit half a dozen garage sales in an hour to find it.

Middle class garage sale shoppers come later, often stay longer, personalize the relation to the seller, and talk more freely about the objects on display. Some will take an interest in keeping articles properly in place – something which is not likely in a department store. After all, today's garage sale shopper may be tomorrow's seller! Middle class shoppers are sympathetic to the plight of the garage sale seller if the sale is not going well. Often a token purchase will be made, perhaps of a book or kitchen implement.

Garage sales prosper in the morning and languish in the afternoon. There may be a spurt at lunch time. For the veteran garage sale shopper, the game is over by noon. The same is true for blue collar and lower socioeconomic classes. Few are willing to spend the whole day moving among garage sales, criss-crossing the town, and sometimes having difficulty finding addresses. For the seller, the afternoon may be a long one. Families often combine their wares. More things are offered for sale, and perhaps more important, sellers can socialize among themselves when sales drop off.

In sum, garage sales are economically oriented expedients for recycling useful and sometimes "collectible" personal and family possessions. They are increasingly popular, and in the aggregate, their multimillion dollar business is important. But they are obviously more than simply an economic phenomenon. They have social as well as utilitarian aspects. The alternative to the discard of the still-useful material object, achieved through being purveyed in the garage sale not only provides a mechanism for the disposal of unwanted goods, but involves the daily creation of thousands of small sociable settings of temporary and shortlived nature. Persons across all age, sex, and social class spectra may participate in these low-stress settings, and may become associated with and even addicted to garage sales. Purposes for attending may vary from a serious venture into a money-saving goods exchange. It may be a quasi-enterprise or merely a pastime activity.

### THE AUCTION

Community based auctions involving personal and family possessions, the 'baggage

of life' as we have come to know these possessions, share some common features with garage sales. But there are somewhat different economic, and vastly different social factors which distinguish them.

At the broader societal level, both garage sales and auctions are socioeconomic mechanisms to redistribute economically valuable objects within local communities. They help sustain the high market exchange activity associated with consumption oriented mass society. While auctions of personal possessions are fewer in number than garage sales, in a ratio of about one to eight, their dollar value business is substantially greater. Perhaps more important, from the social scientist's viewpoint, they are differently organized, and their operations reveal different social and psychological mechanisms.

Garage sale mechanisms are essentially one-to-one. The owner sells a used but useful object to the customer in a face-to-face transaction. There are rarely competitors of the movement, and there is no competitive bidding among customers. First-come is first-served and amateurism prevails.

The auction operates through professionals. Basically, the exchange relation involves three parties: 1) the seller; 2) the auctioneer; and 3) competing buyers. Buyers need not know sellers, although they sometimes do. *But the exchange relation in an auction is carried out in arenas of contest. It produces social and psychological phenomena not present in garage sales.*

The auction setting in which arrangement of goods to be put up for bid, and the business-like atmosphere generated by the auctioneers and their staff establishes clearly the injunction that "this is a place of business." The seriousness of the auctioneer-seller has its counterpart in the demeanor of the potential buyer who demonstrates serious intent by registering at the table set up for handling sales, and who receives an indentifying number usually printed on a 3"x5" card. The card provides an abstracted identity, as it would seem on the surface, for the transactions theoretically could all be carried out without involving names of personalities. The personal, ego-involving factor comes into play in several ways, and most participants, if they are to cope successfully with the vicissitudes

and social dynamics of the auction, will develop *positioning strategies* involving ecological and personal life space.

But the auction serves more than one purpose, and from a sociological standpoint, it is equally relevant to analyze and develop propositions about those who are not serious potential bidders and buyers as it is to be concerned with those who are. To pursue the matter further, we should first enter a disclaimer concerning the implication of the non-serious auction attenders. Granted that they will not participate directly at the economic or exchange level, it does not follow that their presence at community auctions is irrelevant or, Heaven forbid, dysfunctional! On the contrary, there are several so-called functions of the non-bidding auction attenders. Not all of them are obvious.

For example, it is a commonplace in the auction business that a large crowd is better than a small crowd. The more cars, and the more people inspecting the auction items, the more likely people will stay, participate, and be subject to crowd or collective excitement. If only 30 of 100 persons of attending should register for number cards, it is better for the auction business than if 15 or 20 attenders receive cards. The numbers count even if the proportion of non-bidders is high.

Continuing our focus on the larger number of non-bidding attenders, their presence is always welcome. One might ask why they should stay if they are not going to bid, and what are some of the consequences of their presence? It is no surprise to find that there are some wives present who let their husbands bid; and that some are children who cannot bid; and that some are relatives or friends who are taken to the auction as a social event. This function is important.

Sociability is generated easily at auctions and may permeate the entire attendance. Some sociability may be of the moment, for others the sociability may reflect long and friendly acquaintances. There is a notable absence of solemnity, seriousness or even attention to the auction proper by many nonbidding attenders. Lunch baskets are brought; soft drinks, hot dogs, and other food may be sold. At estate auctions the grounds will be dotted with small sociable clusters, each creating its own temporary mini-society. While

these are not great occasions, they are by no means trivial. Social exchanges tend to run from mildly friendly to quite personal. Small group sociologists would agree that such sociability is integrative, and that it leads to the development of a sense of unity and to coherence and meaning in the community.

The auction itself and the actual auctioning of goods presents an interesting sociological phenomenon. Those interested in bidding and purchasing cluster around the auctioneer and his assistants. The staccato chant is universally recognizable and to some degree, exciting. Whether persons present are practiced auction attenders or relative newcomers, there is a quickening of pulse and a surge of collective excitement generated by the auctioneer's voice. A variety of auctioneer strategies are used to get the bidding started, and to keep it going, and to maintain continuity of interest. Auctioneers are quick to spot interested bidders, and to identify their interests. Some regular attenders, including used-goods sellers may be identified by name. *What the auctioneer most wants is a closely packed group of competitive minded and purchase motivated participants.* An "auction vortex" can be made up of 20 or 30 such bidders. The action is here, in a slow-moving tightly packed group whose emotional involvement is manipulable by the skilled auctioneer. Here, members sometimes find themselves bidding far more than they expected for objects that they earlier may not have been eager to purchase. Outbid on something they wanted, participants will bid up and find themselves contracting for something they do not particularly want. They may return such items to sell at another auction at a later date.

In the center of the auction vortex, the auctioneer runs through a variety of tricks and strategies which may be familiar to many auction attenders. What is less appreciated is the insidiously developing stress and anxiety, first, over getting what one wants, and second, over not being dragooned into buying something one does not want. The pace of the transactions is rapid. Thousands of articles may be auctioned off in an afternoon. Too slow a pace, or too much time spent with one type of object such as tools or kitchenware, may produce diffidence. If the auction drags on, *auction fatigue* may set in. For the elderly, auc-

tion fatigue is an important consideration.

Auctioneers constantly work at a near-frenzied pitch. Small objects may be grouped and sold at a very low price. The auctioneer cannot be concerned with owner sentiment. His commitment is to the highest number of sales at a fair enough price in the shortest possible time. The upshot of this pressure cooker sales imperative is that many persons learn either to withstand the blandishments, ploys, and impatience of the auctioneer, and to manage their purchasing rather than have it managed for them. Or they may want to withdraw from the vortex to the fringe where they may enter an occasional bid, but not find themselves subject to auctioneer dominance. We can term this adaptive behavior "space management" or "position management". One manages 1) stress, and 2) threat to self control by movement in physical space. Movement nearer to the vortex means testing ego strength and determination to get what one wants at one's own price. Moving away from the vortex removes the auctioneer from occupation of one's *life space*, that personal arena which each one tries to maintain to be assured of a private world where independent thoughts are possible.

#### **ELDERLY PARTICIPATION**

Another factor in community auction deals with attendance and participation of the elderly. The prevailing social norms of purchase and acquisitions have long held that the elderly need less, and should be, and in fact, are doing with less as they approach the status of the very old. Once past the age of fifty-five, most adults begin looking at their "baggage of life" with an eye to divesting themselves of those things no longer needed or which have lost their symbolic value. In their sixties, the elderly are faced with many problems which may include moving to another part of the country. In their seventies, they may move to an extended care facility. Sometimes a nursing home becomes an urgent prospect. Between the ages of 75 and 90, the elderly have a 20 percent chance of spending some of their last years in an long-term care facility.

The elderly, then, are faced with two clear questions at a community auction. 1) Do they need to add to their baggage of life? 2) Can they summon the ego strength needed to participate and enter the vortex, and thus become

successful, non-exploited bidders and buyers? Many observations of auction behavior have led me to conclude that despite the stress adaptation mechanisms available, very few of the very elderly can succeed in this.

The one exception often noted is the quite elderly person who sits or stands for an hour or more in front of one object, summons up resolve from the depths of her personality, and refuses to be moved away from her place, making a determined effort to acquire her prize. Auctioneers may close off bidding to reward such an elderly person for her determined vigil. With this exception, a large number of observations lead to the conclusion that many of the old and most of the very old attendees are more likely found socializing and passing time at the community auctions than in the thick of the bidding. However, they may always enter the action, whether to test their ego strength or to get caught up briefly in the collective excitement, and to be a true participant, without serious obligation to bid competitively. And perhaps not so easily, they may step aside to let the whirl of concentrated action sweep by. Position management here is crucial. One in the vortex of the auctioneer's quick banter and the challenge to dare a slightly higher bid, and still another – may produce another auction casualty, as a purchaser of unwanted auction merchandise.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Auctions have a high stress potential, but the wise or adapting auction attendee can minimize the threat of stress by taking a position nearer or farther from the vortex of the auction. Ego strength and coping ability may be tested at auctions, but those who cannot stand the pressures and stress of an auction-dominating auctioneer and the competitiveness of fellow auction attendees can usually move to safer positions, out of the line of action. While garage sale participation seems a virtually stress-free and interesting pastime, and an occasion for sociability with little cost, auctions put the attendee at a certain amount of financial and ego risk. To make participation in auctions substantially free of such risk is a challenge to human service practitioners. Sociologists should be ready to enter the arena of secondhand purchases along with consumer educators and formulators of consumer protection policies.