

Disposable Income

Turn castoffs into cash with these easy-sell secrets

BY AMY MACLIN

Think of all that unloved stuff spilling off your shelves or crammed into your closet: the last-generation iPod, the Donna Karan dress that never fit, Aunt Sally's porcelain shepherdess. With a little ingenuity, you could find you're sitting on a gold mine ... or at least this year's holiday fund. Here, the *Reader's Digest* guide to thinning your overstock and fattening your wallet.



GETTING STARTED: WHAT IS IT WORTH?

That heirloom chest in your dining room looks just like the Stickley piece that pulled in a \$3,500 estimate on last night's *Antiques Roadshow*. Should you get an appraisal?

The first thing the experts will tell you: Manage your expectations. "All you see on those shows is the highlights," says Alex Winter, general manager at Hake's Americana & Col-

What's Worth the Least?

- A. A pulled tooth
- B. A glass eye
- C. A "limited edition" collectible

Answer: C. "It's junk," says auctioneer Walt Kolenda. "They'll say 'Limited to a firing of 10,000 of these ceramic plates.' Yeah, 10,000A. Then they'll do another lot: 10,000B. They make millions." On the other hand, Good Ole Tom's, in Connecticut, and other metal retailers will buy your dental gold (Tom's figures it at 16 karats), and Dave Adelman, of Jerry's Pawn Shop in Atlanta, says his father-in-law once paid \$100 for a glass eye from a customer down on his luck—though of course he had no intention of reselling it. "That's what we call a sweetheart loan," Adelman admits.

lectibles in York, Pennsylvania. "Don't get your hopes up until you've done the research."

The second thing: "What happens on *Antiques Roadshow* is not actually an appraisal," says appraiser Beth Szescila of Houston, who appears on the show. "It's an educated guess based on the appraiser's years of experience." An appraisal requires extensive research, it's backed up with comparable merchandise on the market, and it costs \$100 to \$150 an hour, so it's not something you want to invest in unless you're fairly certain of what you've got. That said, how do you find out what you've got?

Do your homework. "EBay is not a good place to do research for authenticity," says J. Michael Flanigan, owner of J. M. Flanigan American Antiques in Baltimore, "but it's a great place to see what people are buying and selling." Massachusetts auctioneer Walt Kolenda recommends *Kovels' Antiques & Collectibles Price Guide*, updated yearly by Ralph and Terry Kovel (kovels.com). Other sources are online appraisal sites, like instappraisal.com and the appraisal archives of Kolenda's site, auctionwally.com.

Remember that price guides are just guides. If you find your Tiffany lamp in the guidebook for \$800, don't assume you'll get that price from a dealer. Market values may have shifted in the year since the guide was published, and much comes down to what dealers already have and what customers are buying. Like any businessperson, a dealer has to make a profit. For a

high-quality item in the Kovels' guide, says Kolenda, a dealer can usually get between 50 and 75 percent.

Go to an antiques show. Bring some high-quality pictures of your item and then walk around and talk to people, advises Flanigan. Antiques shows bring many dealers under one roof, so chances are, someone there will specialize in items like yours.

Hot

It's not silver. It's not gold. But a fairly rare copper cent can typically go for \$425 to \$2,000.



A silver dollar minted in large quantities can be worth only its weight in metal: about \$13.

Not

Get some estimates from dealers. “If you’ve given good information and have items that are worth selling, dealers will be happy to make an appointment,” says Kolenda. “Antiquers can’t order stock from a manufacturer, so we’re always eager to make new contacts.” Some dealers will make estimates based on e-mailed photos and descriptions, while others will say that’s only a starting point. “With pictures, I can confirm a negative, but I can’t confirm a positive,” says Flanigan. “If you think it’s an 18th-century tea table, I may be able to tell you that it is not, but I cannot promise you that it is.” Many dealers will be happy to come to your home to view larger items; just ask.

HOW TO SELL IT YOURSELF

On eBay

This old favorite is still the easiest way to get your merchandise in front of the widest audience, especially if your wares fall in the ever-

popular categories of Clothing, Shoes and Accessories; Home & Garden; Collectibles; or Electronics. Some tips for a successful auction from Jim Griffith, dean of eBay education:

Check out past auctions. Look at the information, photos, keywords, and prices that have worked for previous sellers. At the top of eBay’s home page, click on Advanced Search, then enter the keyword of the item you want to sell, check the box for “Completed Listings,” and click Search. Green prices mean those items have sold in the past two weeks.

Make your title mean something. The 55 characters in your title should be words a buyer will search for: “Kiwi Green 5 Quart Le Creuset Dutch Oven,” not “++Fab Green Cookware LOOK++.”

Answer questions before buyers ask them. “You’re trying to re-create the experience of someone coming to your garage sale,” Griffith says. In the description, provide as much detail as you can about weight, measurements, make and model, materials, and how many times the item has been used. If the digital camera you’re selling has a scratch, be up-front and feature it in a close-up photo; that helps instill buyer confidence, adds Griffith.

Take simple photos that showcase your merchandise. Place the item on a solid contrasting background, and use as much natural light as possible.

Don’t set a “reserve” price. Minimum prices really work only if you’re a savvy seller with a valuable item, says Griffith. Buyers are looking for bargains, and reserve prices drive them away.

Consider setting a fixed price. If your item is rare or in high demand, then an auction format will likely drive the price higher. If your item is readily available, then it’s best to set a reasonable fixed price that will lure in the comparison shoppers.

Sell individually, not in lots. You might think your china is worth more as a set, says Griffith, but that’s usually not true on eBay, where people come looking for replacements.

Be patient. Most auctions pick up speed in the last 15 minutes of bidding.

At a Pawnshop

If you’re on the fence about selling that old engagement ring, consider a pawnshop: You’ll be getting a temporary loan, with your item as collateral. The

Other DIY Marketplaces

Bonanzle.com: An online garage sale, with a community of small sellers and the chance to negotiate in real time via instant messenger.

Dealitlive.com: Anybody with a webcam and a mike can star in this DIY version of the Home Shopping Network. (This one’s still at the beta stage.)

Portero.com: Luxury jewelry, accessories, artwork, and housewares.

Half.com: Books, movies, CDs, and video games, new and used.

Abebooks.com: New and secondhand books both rare and common.

Alibris.com: New and used books, music, movies, and textbooks.

Buymytronics.com: Sell your used, new, and even broken gadgets, including iPods, cell phones, and game consoles.

Secondspin.com: Used CDs, DVDs, and video games.

Craigslist.org, kijiji.com: If you want to keep things local—because you have an item too large to ship or just like the personal touch. Both are free.

National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops (narts.org): Search for stores based on city or zip code.

owner pays you cash for your unwanted bauble, then holds the item for a waiting period that varies from 30 days to six months, depending on the state. During that waiting period (which may be followed by a grace period—say, ten days), you can “buy” your item back by paying off the loan with interest. Maximum rates (25 percent in Georgia, for

TV commercials from jewelers offering cash for unwanted bling. Places like Good Ole Tom’s of East Hartford, Connecticut, will weigh your mismatched earrings and broken chains, then pay you by the pennyweight (about 1.6 grams). The price fluctuates according to the price of gold, says owner Tom Tinney, who was

Hot

A Beatles album withdrawn from stores is now a coveted rarity that can be worth almost \$39,000.

example) are determined state by state.

Pawning can be an easy, low-risk way to put money in your pocket, says Dave Adelman of the National Pawnbrokers Association. At Jerry’s Pawn Shop in Atlanta, Adelman sells jewelry, stereo equipment, fur coats, and power tools at prices that depend on supply and demand: “If I have all the TVs I can store, I may not go for much if you bring in another one,” he says.

To a Gold Buyer

“Gold loves bad news,” says auctioneer Walt Kolenda, which is why the sagging economy is yielding all those



A real album from an arguably knock-off group (after all, Davy is no Ringo) is worth decidedly less: about \$19.

Not

recently paying \$20 per pennyweight for 14-karat; the more gold a customer brings, the better

the rate. (A customer with only one small, lightweight chain might get only \$12.50.)

Good Ole Tom’s also does a gold-by-mail business, as do a number of other merchants: You stick your jewelry in an envelope, mail it in, and wait for a price quote. If you go that route, warns Tinney, make sure that your package is insured for the full amount. (Also consider Red Swan, which has done well in recent consumer surveys.)

Tinney also buys silver, including flatware and jewelry, at the market

price, which on one recent morning was about \$17 an ounce. Some premium items, such as Native American jewelry, are worth more than the silver weight and may be bought outright.

you less, since he has operating costs to cover and could be sitting on your item for a while. But if you have only one or two things and need to move them right away, this may be the best option. Pick a dealer by soliciting recommendations, says

Hot

Superheroes rule the world of comic books. *Superman's* 1938 debut comic brought \$317,200 at auction.



It's a fake! It's a reissue! It only looks collectible! And its value plummets accordingly (\$50 to \$100).

Not

OR LET OTHERS DO IT FOR YOU

With an Auction House

If you're a bit of a gambler, consider an auction house, especially if you have several items. An auctioneer has to be licensed and bonded, and he has a vested interest in getting the most money for your item, since he makes a commission (20 to 30 percent) based on its sale price. A good auction can whip dealers into a frenzy and drive up prices, says auctioneer Walt Kolenda. Find local auctions at auctionzip.com.

With a Dealer

If you're a cautious type, you may be happier with a dealer. He'll usually pay you immediately, but he may pay

New York dealer Nick Dawes. "Dealers have a reputation that they're out to scam you," he says. "But if a dealer is well established, he can't afford not to be honest."

It's advisable to make appointments at a few places, says Kolenda. He cautions, however, that dealers do hate to hear "I'll get back to you," so be prepared to hear a lower estimate if you go back a second time.

At a Consignment Shop

Yet another way to move your merchandise if you can sit tight, says Szescila: consignment shops. You take your item to the shop, the merchant sets a price, and you get a percentage of the money when your item sells.

(LEFT) COURTESY COMICCONNECT.COM AND METROPOLISCOMICS.COM; (RIGHT) COURTESY TREASURYCOMICS.COM

Do You Have Any of These?

ALBUMS

The guide: *Rockin' Records*, by Jerry Osborne, or *Goldmine's Price Guide to Collectible Record Albums*, by Neal Umphred.

What's hot: Mint-condition promotional recordings from well-known artists on acetate, says Scott Neuman of Forever Vinyl in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

What's not: Big hodge-podge collections like the one Grandpa has, with a little Sinatra, a little Elvis, and a lot of classical and opera. "You're lucky if you get ten cents on the dollar," Neuman says.

The grail: The Beatles' so-called Butcher Block album (see page 141), which features the Fab Four holding beheaded baby dolls, an image so controversial, the album was withdrawn and reissued.

ANTIQUÉ JEWELRY

The guide: *Kovels' Antiques & Collectibles Price Guide*, or *Warman's Jewelry*, by Christie Romero.

What's hot: Any type of signed designer piece (Tiffany, Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels) or pieces that

have a recognizable vintage style, like Art Deco, says Richard Brodney, owner of Brodneý Antiques and Jewelry in Boston.

What's not: "It's always something somebody's grandmother had," says Brodneý. "The grandmother, God bless her, she's 85 and tells the granddaughter, I'm leaving you this ring. It's worth a lot of money. And a couple hundred dollars is a lot of money."

BOOKS

The guide: There's no definitive price reference, says Fred Bass, co-owner of Strand Book Store in New York: "The field is too vast. You couldn't lift it." He recommends checking sites such as amazon.com, alibris.com, and abebooks.com but cautions, "Just because somebody lists a book for \$800 doesn't mean someone will buy it for \$800."

What's hot: Good-condition photography, art, and history books. Collectible first editions from classic authors, such as Faulkner and Dickens, and a few modern scribes, such as Stephen King. (A rare leather-bound copy of

The Regulators, written by King under the pen name Richard Bachman, sold at abebooks.com for \$8,000.)

What's not: First editions of recently published books.

COINS

The guide: *The Blue Book Handbook of U.S. Coins*, by R. S. Yeoman, updated annually, is a rough guide to the prices you can expect a dealer to pay for your coins. *The Official Red Book: A Guide Book of United States Coins*, also by Yeoman, contains more detail about each coin, plus the retail price, which is what your dealer will try to get when he resells it.

What's hot: Anything very rare, anything gold.

What's not: "Old silver dollars are where sellers are mostly disappointed," says Bob Walter, co-owner of Sam Sloat Coins in Westport, Connecticut. "It's not the age of the coin," he says. "It's the number of them that were made and the condition."

Tip: Don't clean your coins. "Anything you do will disturb the original surface and affect the value," Walter says.

COMIC BOOKS

The guide: *The Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, by Robert M. Overstreet.

What's hot: Any first appearances of characters from the 1930s to the 1960s, says Vincent Zurzolo of Metropolis Collectibles in New York.

What's not: Any comics from the past 20 years. Also, DC's oversize Famous First Edition comic books,

What's not: 1920s and 1930s dining sets that are reproductions of pieces from the 16th and 17th centuries, says dealer J. Michael Flanigan. "They look like they came out of a castle," he says, "but they were produced by the tens of thousands out of places like Grand Rapids."

thing that looks as if it represents the age in which it was made (like figures in period costumes), through the '60s and '70s.

What's not: Just about everything else. "At *Antiques Roadshow*, I've sat at the pottery and porcelain table since the first season, and the typical value of what we see is under \$10," Dawes says. "Lots of porcelain services that people inherited

Hot

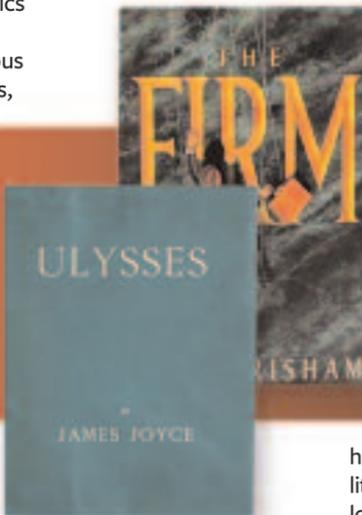
This 20th-century hot shot's hot book can sell for as much as \$450,000—if it's a first edition in excellent condition.

reprints of first-appearance comics that are often mistaken by sellers for originals.

FURNITURE

The guide: This is such a broad category that it's difficult to name one definitive guide, according to the experts, but *Kovels' Antiques & Collectibles Price Guide* is a good place to start.

What's hot: Stickley mission oak, Arts and Crafts, Heywood-Wakefield, says auctioneer Walt Kolenda.



POTTERY AND PORCELAIN

The guide: There's no real definitive guide, says dealer Nick Dawes. A good starting point is the *Kovels' guide* or *Antique Trader Pottery & Porcelain Ceramics Price Guide*, by Kyle Husfloen.

What's hot: Collectible European figurines from the 18th century and any-

Recent bestsellers may bring big bucks for authors, but readers trying to offload a copy get less—even for first editions.

Not

half a century ago have little or no value today. A lot of places don't want to handle it because it's labor-intensive; a service for 12 might have 100 or 200 pieces."

SPORTS TRADING CARDS

The guide: *The Beckett Baseball Card Price Guide* and other Beckett guides.

What's hot: Vintage cards in good condition from the turn of the 20th century through the '60s.

Hot

The famous T206

Honus Wagner card from 1909 last changed hands for \$2.8 million.



An ungraded card featuring NBA journeyman Johnny Moore is worth approximately \$1.25—in perfect condition.

Not

What's not: Anything from the oversaturation era of the 1990s. People are certain that their unopened boxes from the 1990s are going to cover college tuition for their kids, says Tracy Hackler of Beckett.

Tip: A key card of a player on the biggest stages (the Olympics, the Super Bowl) can appreciate significantly. After Michael Phelps's performance in Beijing, one of his autographed cards went from \$60 to \$800 in the span of a week.

TOYS

The guide: Whatever your type of toy, it probably has its own special book. In the past 20 years, there's been a "really big boom" of price guides for every type of collectible toy—*Star Wars*, Disney, Barbies, says Alex Winter of Hake's.

What's hot: Merchandise tied to the first *Star Wars* film—as long as it's still in the blister pack and

"never made it into a kid's hands," Winter says. *Star Wars* items were produced in

huge quantities, he adds, so the premium value is on original packaging. For older, more rare toys—Disneyana from the 1930s, for instance—it's less important to have the box.

What's not: Loose Lukes whose tiny plastic lightsabers were swallowed long ago; a missing package and accessories can reduce a figure's value from \$100 to \$15 or less.

PUTTING THE SIGH IN SIGHTSEER

Think the toughest thing park rangers have to contend with is grizzlies? Think again. It's tourists' questions, like these asked at various national parks:

Niagara Falls State Park (New York): "Where can I buy a ticket for the barrel ride?"

Grand Canyon National Park (Arizona): "What year did they build this?"

Everglades National Park (Florida): "Where are all the rides?"

Mesa Verde National Park (Colorado): "Do you know of any undiscovered ruins?"

From the *Sacramento* (California) Bee