

Money — Smart Ways to Get Rid of Your Stuff

By Lisa Gerstner, From *Kiplinger's Personal Finance*, April 2015



image: <http://www.kiplinger.com/kipimages/pages/13324.jpg>

Maybe you're downsizing from a sprawling house in the suburbs to a downtown condo. Perhaps a parent is moving to a retirement community, and you and your siblings are excavating the family home. Or maybe you're just plain tired of having too much stuff. Whatever the reason, having fewer possessions can simplify your life and put some cash in your pocket. But doing it the right way requires patience and possibly help from the pros.

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What's the right way? That depends on how many belongings you have, your timeline and how much of the work you're willing to do on your own. For large-scale downsizing, estate-sale and auction professionals can help sift through your stuff, estimate its value and sell it for a good price. If you have a number of valuable items to sell but not enough

to warrant a large sale (or if you want a shot at selling things that didn't go in the first attempt), consider consignment shops and Web sites such as [eBay](#). And don't forget charitable donations, which can reward your generosity with a tax deduction.

If you're selling or donating items of significant value — or if you're not sure whether they're valuable — call in an appraiser. At www.appraisers.org, you can search for accredited personal-property appraisers by location and specialty. Fees

vary by region and by the appraiser's accreditation level but may range from \$125 to \$300 per hour. Or an estate-sale or auction company that you hire may have qualified appraisers on staff. Ask appraisers about their credentials (such as accreditation from the American Society of Appraisers, the International Society of Appraisers or the Appraisers Association of America) and how long they've conducted appraisals.

Invite family members to take anything you're willing to give away. For those who aren't in your region, you could post photographs of items online with a tool that everyone can access, such as Dropbox, suggests Mary Kay Buysse, executive director of the National Association of Senior Move Managers. Don't overlook items that may have sentimental value. "A lot of times, it's the grandchildren who want Grandmother's apron or her china set," says Victoria Roberts, a certified professional organizer and owner of Victoria Roberts Organizing, in Mill Valley, Calif. But in your enthusiasm to clean house, don't foist leftovers on those who don't show interest. Chances are, they'll sneak it into the trash (or sell it themselves) when you're not looking.

Selling a lot of stuff

Temper your expectations about how valuable your old furnishings may be. Preferences for furniture and decor, especially among younger families, have shifted from traditional and antique to modern — and easy to transport (think Ikea or Crate and Barrel's CB2). Heavy, dark furniture is flooding the market as more people downsize, and the supply is outpacing demand. Flat-screen TVs and digital music are making entertainment centers obsolete, and dining suites are disappearing along with formal dining rooms.

"I'm in the position of telling people that the market for their wonderful furniture isn't what it was 10 or 20 years ago," says Kathleen Orozco, owner of appraisal and estate-liquidation firm Kathleen Orozco & Associates, in Denver. "The buyers aren't there."

Despite the challenges, you can find a good home for your castoffs — and cash in on some of them, too.

Host an estate sale. If you have a houseful of items to sell that add up to several thousand dollars in value, hosting buyers in your home through an estate sale is a prime option. Ideally, you'll have plenty of time to choose a company and have the liquidator prepare your home and belongings for a sale. But if you're on a tight deadline, a pro should be able to help you wrap it up quickly.

Keep in mind that if your possessions aren't worth at least, say, \$10,000, a company may not agree to hold your sale. And estate

liquidators take a sizable chunk of the proceeds — typically about 35% to 40%, says Julie Hall, director of the [American Society of Estate Liquidators](#). But they will also take a lot of the work off your hands. They often have connections with local, regular buyers of antiques and other items to whom they can advertise your goods (and they'll promote your sale to the general public, too). They'll price items and set them up in your home in a way that's attractive and that avoids bumps and breakage as buyers pass through. And a staff present during the sale can control crowds, run the cashier stand and keep an eye out for thieves. "An estate sale is not a glorified yard sale," says Hall. "There's a lot of sweat equity."

Although many antiques, carpets and furniture aren't the draw they once were, they may have a better chance of selling from your house than from other venues because buyers can more easily visualize them in their own homes, says Orozco. Utilitarian items such as tools and kitchen supplies often appeal to buyers. If having the sale in your home isn't realistic — say, because you've sold the home and are in a rush to remove the items — look for a company that will take away the goods to sell them.

You can look for an estate liquidator at [www.aselonline.com](#) and [www.estatesales.net](#), or ask for referrals from a professional organizer or real estate agent. Select at least three companies to invite for a walk-through of your home, and ask about credentials and training (such as for appraisals) and any required licensing in your area, as well as for references.

Check with the Better Business Bureau as well as consumer review sites such as Angie's List for a history of serious complaints. Ask whether there are additional fees beyond the standard cut, such as for advertising, cleanup or appraisal. If you have time, attend a sale to see how a liquidator runs the show. And plan not to be at home during the sale, lest you cringe at the sight of strangers rummaging through your stuff.

The auction option. The estate-sale company might send valuable unsold items to auction, especially if they're likely to be more popular in a different region. Or you can send them to auction yourself.

Auctions come with both the potential upside of a higher price than expected and the possible downside of a disappointingly low price. Often an auction service comes to your home and takes items to a gallery to sell along with other goods. If you have enough high-value items, an auctioneer may have an off-site sale exclusively of your items or host an auction at your residence (especially if you are selling the house along with all of its contents). As with an estate sale, you'll likely need several thousand dollars' worth of items to justify a sale from your home.

The fee to sell at auction varies depending on where you are and how the sale is conducted. Generally, the higher the value of items being sold, the lower the commission, says Tim Luke, an auctioneer and valuation expert with TreasureQuest Group. Commissions that auctioneers charge commonly range from 10% to 25% of the “hammer price” but may be as high as 50%. Plus, there may be fees for transportation, storage or marketing.

Ask for referrals to a good auction service, or comb local listings. At www.auctioneers.org, you can search for an auctioneer by location, specialty and professional designation. A Graduate Personal Property Appraiser has completed classwork to conduct appraisals and keeps up to date with continuing education; a Master Personal Property Appraiser has had more-advanced training. Interview several candidates, check reviews and licensing, and compare fees. Once you’ve chosen a service, a representative will outline the structure of the sale with you. If you can’t stand to see certain items sell for less than a minimum price, they can be sold with a “reserve price” — if they don’t capture a specified minimum bid, they don’t sell.

Smaller-scale solutions

If you have a handful of valuable items to sell, you could try parcelling them out online. Lynn Dralle, who runs www.thequeen-ofauctions.com and makes a living reselling antiques and other items on eBay, says that high-end, brand-name products tend to do well on eBay. Popular items have ranged from china and flatware to old toys and perfume bottles, but to grab good prices they have to be sought-after types or brands.

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To get a sense of potential moneymakers you may have on hand, search the listings of sold items on eBay. Click on “Advanced” in the upper-right corner at www.ebay.com and enter keywords such as the brand name and type of item. Check the box for “Sold listings” and click “Search” to find final selling prices. They’ll help you decide whether an item is worth posting and what price you might expect to capture.

eBay takes a 10% cut of your sale (unless you have an eBay Store), and PayPal takes 2.9% plus 30 cents per domestic transaction (up to \$3,000 a month) to process payments. Plus, you’ll want to estimate how much to charge a buyer for shipping. You can use tools on the Web sites of the U.S. Postal Service, UPS and FedEx to estimate shipping prices. Dralle recommends choosing the maximum price you might pay to ship an item across the country and listing it as your domestic shipping rate.

Posting and selling household goods on Craigslist is free, but

you’re limiting your audience to locals. Lower-value goods and bulky ones that you’d rather not ship are good candidates for Craigslist because buyers can come to you to pick them up. Holding a yard sale may also be worthwhile for unloading those items.

Consignment shops are a brick-and-mortar alternative for selling high-quality furniture, antiques, clothing and other items. Typically, a shop will display your goods on the floor for 30 to 90 days, and it may discount the asking price as time passes. Stores take a cut of about half of the price of anything that sells, but you won’t have to put in the effort of trying to peddle it yourself. Call local shops to ask about their policies as well as what types of items tend to sell well and which aren’t worth the effort.

Donate it

Giving belongings that are in good condition to charity can save you the hassle of trying to sell them, if you don’t mind forgoing the cash. (Donating is also a good way to unload items that didn’t find a home at sale.) Thrift shops, such as Goodwill and Salvation Army stores and local operations, will take a variety of household items, furnishings and clothing. Call or go online to find out which items they don’t want (for example, used computer equipment, TVs and ratty or scuffed furniture) and to see if they will pick up your donations from your home.

If you have anything with cultural or historic value — say, an artifact from the Civil War — a local museum or historic house may be happy to take it off your hands. Churches may be able to use certain items, too. If you itemize deductions on your tax return, don’t forget to get a receipt for each batch of goods you donate; it’s up to you to attach a list of the items to the receipt. You can calculate their fair market value, on which tax deductions for noncash donations are based, by using prices on resale sites (such as eBay’s listing of sold items), the [Salvation Army’s donation guide](#), or Intuit’s free “[ItsDeductible](#)” program. You’ll have to provide a description of noncash donations that exceed \$500 in value on Form 8323. Items worth more than \$5,000 require an appraisal.

Deal with emotional baggage

It can be difficult to let go of belongings with sentimental value. Your collection of books may represent years of personal development. Gifts you’ve received are associated with friends and family. Use these tips to stay focused.

Compose a mission statement. Victoria Roberts, a certified professional organizer in Mill Valley, Calif., suggests writing down a goal that you can reread when the going gets

tough. It can also help you resist the temptation to rent a storage unit to stash things you are having trouble discarding. Unless you're saving something for a designated reason — say, a grandchild who has claimed a bedroom set but won't have space for a few more months — storage units are usually a waste of money and delay an inevitable decision.

Enlist help. Someone with no vested interest in your stuff can push you to keep only the worthwhile items. She may also be able to neutralize family tension or squabbles. And for elderly folks with physical limitations, an assistant can help with lifting and moving. If you're using a liquidation company or a senior move manager, its reps may help you sort the clutter. Or hire a professional organizer (ask for referrals, or find one at www.napo.net). An organizer may charge \$30 to \$80 an hour or by the project. Even if you decide not to pay someone to assist you, try making it a social event by bringing in friends and family. They can help make a tedious process fun. Just be sure to plan your strategy if family members want the same item.

Scope out the new place. If you're moving, get a floor plan of your new home, and measure the door frames and windows. That will help you let go of things that won't fit. For a stronger visualization, use masking tape to outline the dimensions of rooms in your new home on the floor of your current home.

Keep only what you love most. If you need to get rid of, say, a large collection, hang on to a couple of your most cherished items as keepsakes, suggests Lauri Ward, home design expert and president of Redecorate.com. She advises keeping only the best, most loved and most used items. "Liking something isn't enough," she says. (Take digital photos of what you discard to help you remember it.) Do away with anything that's worn or outdated, unless it holds strong sentimental value. Your new home should feel fresh. ■

Read more at <http://www.kiplinger.com/article/real-estate/T029-C000-S002-money-smart-ways-to-get-rid-of-your-stuff.html#eFqoleGVH10Bcb47.99>

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