

THE UNDERTAKER OF THINGS

WORDS & PHOTOS VIVIAN KNEZEVICH

Gary runs Peerless Estate Sales, a professional moving sales and estate liquidation service, "because the hearse doesn't have a luggage rack." Each year the full service company evaluates, prices, merchandises, promotes, and staffs 60 to 70 estate sales, hosts over 50,000 attendees, and sells over 100,000 items.

On this warm July day, I meet Gary in the St. Johns neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, for his first look at his latest sale. The mid-century home sits at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac giving no external indication of the many collections it contains.

As we enter and begin navigating antiques, musical instruments, and household goods, Gary comes upon what looks like a giant yellow egg about 3 feet tall. In seconds, Gary decides the vintage barbecue may have sold for \$150 in good condition, but in disrepair it is likely worthless.

"When I touch things, I know how much they're worth. I know if they're garbage or not. I don't have to think

about it, because I don't have the emotional connection."

Gary says that his business has been compared to archeology and the A&E Reality show "Storage Wars," but the reality is far less dramatic. "We're just doing our job, the treasure hunt concept isn't accurate. It's a projection of customers who don't do this every day. It's a business and the business is getting your house empty by closing."

A house of items to liquidate is a liability for the owner no matter which of Gary's Four D's (Death, Downsize, Divorce, or Dysfunction) prompts the sale. He helps the real estate broker, seller, or estate executor alleviate one of the more stressful aspects of these complex life events. After the sale, the property will have gone from a potentially dangerous and cluttered space to "move-in ready" condition.

While estate sales are not the dramatic capers some imagine them, these complex operations do require a high level of skill and experience.

As we tour the home, Gary lets me in on four trade secrets: programming, merchandising, marketing, and safety.

Gary intentionally "programs the house," by planning the flow of traffic from collection to collection to give customers a natural path to

valuable. High value items bring value to each other, so Gary's first step is combing through the clutter to find the most valuable, appealing pieces. He then presents them together usually in one of the front rooms of the home. With over a decade of experience, Gary has an instinctual feel for the value and

spices, people buy measuring cups, cleaning supplies." Gary estimates that, under his direction in the last year, proper merchandising resulted in thousands of dollars in sales from items that would usually be thrown away. When people give Gary grief about his merchandising methods, he brings up tee shirts.

discover the goods. He points out a large eagle sculpture bolted to the wall that looks like it might weigh 50 pounds. A customer isn't going to be able to take it down, and if they have to go find someone to help them buy it, they probably won't. Gary addresses this issue by affixing removeable sale tags to all the larger pieces. To claim the item, a customer removes the tag and takes it to the register.

In the backyard, Gary points out a small figurine lying in a pile of other sculptures, "That will sell for double if we take it inside." I ask Gary how he knows which pieces belong at the front and he replies, "Experience. It's not carbon dating. There's not really a process."

Item accessibility and visibility is only half the battle. Gary makes the event as much like a retail experience as possible, because that's how customers shop.

Properly organizing merchandise requires a keen eye for what is

age of an item. I point to an antique gunpowder flask. "How old do we think that is?" I ask.

"There is no age to it," Gary replies. "It's all polished and shiny. That's machine made. If this was old, you would be able to tell that it was handcrafted. Back then they didn't have to worry about mass production. All they had to do was craft one really good piece."

"Everything tells you what it is, you just have to stop and find out." We're back in the main bedroom and I've picked up a steel knife with a colorful handle. "Let's stop and find out." Gary examines the inscription: "Frost Cutlery, Surgical Steel." The knife is listed for \$33 on eBay. He prices this one at \$29, "I don't care what they are listed for. I care what people are actually paying for them."

"Merchandising is about making something out of nothing. We like to see the cabinets full; we like to see a good pantry! People buy

His team shrink wraps them in sets of three and add an attractive shirt size label. "That's how men buy tee shirts: in a package of three."

As we examine a shelf of toys, Gary dispels another common myth, "There is no logic between price and merchandising." Gary spends the same amount of time merchandising this \$5 bag of toys he will price a \$5000 piano. To Gary, any sold item, regardless of price, makes a customer happy, will not be thrown away, and is money in the seller's pocket.

As he sorts through the house, Gary seems like the undertaker of the paraphernalia of this man's life as he prepares the "body" of accumulated items for presentation. Gary says he doesn't think about this; he focuses on helping his clients get through this difficult time and leaves the counselling to clergy and social workers.

When I ask how much he thinks the sale will net, Gary quickly responds,

The woman's obsessive compulsive disorder had caused her to intentionally break every piece of her collection.

Below: Gary Newton surrounded by musical instruments. Bottom: Boots merchandised for the upcoming sale.



"We never guess. I don't have a crystal ball; even one large piece could double the take from a sale."

Before Gary adopted this policy, he once quoted a price based on his first view of a home. Only when he returned to setup the sale did he notice that the woman's obsessive compulsive disorder had caused her to intentionally break every piece of her collection and glue them back together. Virtually everything had to be thrown out.

Beyond the uncertainty, Gary explains that money cannot be the motivating factor behind a sale. The goal is to empty the house and that must be the only expectation. People who have spent tens of thousands of dollars on furniture expect to net that amount from the sale of those items. According to Gary, most large pieces such as dining tables will not sell at all.

"People don't spend thousands of dollars on used furniture at an estate sale." If a piece has enough value to justify it, occasionally Gary will take it back to his space and list it online.

Gary says Peerless doesn't need to put a lot of effort into marketing their sales outside of existing channels. They post sales to their Facebook page, their website, and estate-sales.net and put up neighborhood signs. The customers who show up tend to be regulars. Because of how well designed his sales are, Gary has hundreds of customers that follow him from sale to sale.

At a weekend sale, Peerless hosts about 1500 attendees that make roughly 400 total purchases. This high traffic volume makes safety imperative to a successful sale. While Gary's fee includes insurance, he does not want to tie up a house with an insurance claim because someone fell down the stairs or tripped on merchandise. Before a sale, Gary's team lines the home's floors with paper secured with gaffers' tape and clearly marks and tapes off any stairs. Dangerous merchandise is moved to the front room for monitoring.



Left: The home's extensive collections span many areas. Below: Adirondack ski chair in need of cleaning before the sale.



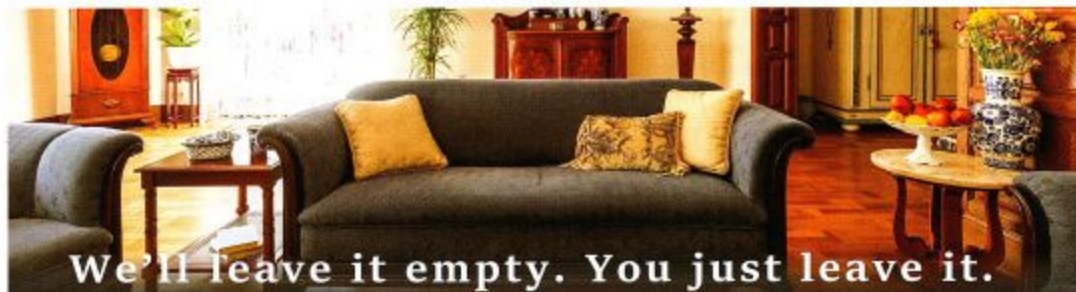
Without an emotional connection to the items, Gary can focus on getting the pieces sold and the house empty.

For added safety and better presentation, Gary's team also significantly cleans the merchandise. Back outside, Gary finds outdoor chairs made of Adirondack skis. "For someone to be willing to sit down and think about buying this piece, it needs to be clean or else [it will be invisible]."

As we end the tour, I find a wooden cane encrusted with dozens of metal emblems from cities across Western Europe. It seems that the owner of the house had spent decades hiking through Europe

collecting these medals. As will soon happen to its fellow items, the walking stick is now cleaned, priced, and displayed for sale.

In a few days, many of the material possessions collected over this man's lifetime of experiences will be sold. And while Gary views his business from a professional perspective, to me that's not the whole story. With his thoughtful services, Gary is also giving this man's memory one last tribute: a respectful end to a life of creativity, passion, and adventure. 🍷



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