

# The Joys of Haggling

By Katy Read



I wasn't ready to change my whole personality, even for the sake of a bargain. Sure,

I like good deals as much as anyone, but I've never been what you'd call a barracuda

when it comes to negotiating them. I'd done a little sophomore-level dickering in car



dealerships and antiques stores, where everyone expects it. But I never thought I'd be trying to drive down the price of a couple of dressers in a furniture store.

Yet there I was, amid the rows of birch and oak and knotty pine, asking the store manager to saw a few dollars off what was already a sale price on two small dressers. I needed one for each of my two young sons, and I'd been told that merchants, if asked, will sometimes give markdowns to customers buying in quantity. For me, two is quantity enough, so my question was just this direct: "If I buy two of these, will you give me a discount?"

Sure enough, the man spent a moment calculating, then offered to sell them to me for 15 percent less than the price on the ticket.

Had I done what I usually do—simply hand over the price on the tag—I'd have walked out \$45 poorer than necessary. Instead, I had haggled like a pro. I felt the exhilaration that comes with uncovering an exciting and potentially lucrative secret, as though I'd stumbled onto some tucked-away little discount store full of eye-popping bargains.

Oh, haggling's not quite a secret. Over the years, I'd always heard that the prices of all kinds of products—from pizza to washing machines—are more negotiable than most people think. I'd gathered that some wily consumers often obtain markdowns on food, clothing, appliances, stereos, furniture, travel accommodations, and even medical services.

But I assumed those kinds of deals went only to tough customers, to shrill types who feign outrage and sticker shock, point to invisible flaws, and eventually bully hapless sales clerks into handing over the goods for less. I figured haggling was for, well, hags.

In fact, anyone can haggle, says Mark Bergen, a

University of Minnesota marketing professor. Bergen once sent a group of students into a shopping mall to see what kinds of bargains they could wrangle, and they returned with 20 bags of M&M's candy—enough for the whole class—that they'd bought for 15 percent off.

"That was my epiphany," Bergen says. "If you can negotiate M&M's, you can negotiate anything."

Different hagglers have different methods. Some specify the price they'll pay, figuring the merchant will accept it or make a counter-offer. Others just declare the ticketed price too high and ask if the merchant will take any less. But all hagglers have one thing in common: They're not afraid to ask.

Here are some tried-and-true haggling strategies that work:

#### Ask nicely

This is the preferred technique of Melissa Greenwood, a mild-mannered San Antonio veterinarian for whom haggling—she winced a bit at the term—is a regular habit. "I'm not hard-nosed about it at all," she says. "I just say, 'Hey, I'm spending a lot of money; could you give me a better deal?' and usually they oblige."

When Greenwood was in an upscale butcher shop buying prime rib for a holiday dinner, she noticed that many of the other meats were

on sale. She asked the manager if he'd mind extending the sale price to her roast, and he lopped 30 percent, or about \$25, off her bill. When her car needed \$1,200 in repairs, Greenwood asked the mechanic to give her a break. He rummaged up a coupon for a couple of



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# Haggling

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hundred dollars off. Then he threw in a free loaner car.

Greenwood, who, in her veterinary practice, is sometimes on the other side of these negotiations, sees the process as a friendly business exchange, not a financial wrestling match. "Lots of goodwill goes both ways," she says.

## Declare the price too high

Lest you think Greenwood is some kind of retail-shop Svengali mesmerizing clerks over the cash register, listen to Daniel Levy, an economist at Emory University in Atlanta.

"I don't really have to have an excuse," he says. "I just tell them, 'This is too high a price; if you sell it for a lower price, I'll buy it,' and most of the time it works."

A native of the former Soviet Georgia, Levy grew up in a culture where bargaining over prices was commonplace. But in the United States, where haggling isn't as culturally ingrained, he didn't believe it was possible until he tried it himself. "It's amazing," he says. "Most people don't even think about trying it. But very often, store managers do have the power to decide on the spot to give you a discount."

Levy, who came to the United States in 1983, enjoys haggling as much for the challenge as for the savings.

He has haggled over a microwave oven, a dishwasher, a boom box, and a basketball stand for his kids. Sometimes he gets a deal because he's buying more than one thing. Sometimes he points out that an item was recently on sale, and he's allowed to pay the sale price. Sometimes he asks the seller to whittle a few dollars off simply to get his business.



## Tell the merchant what you'll pay

Laurie Smith, an Atlanta homemaker, believes in being straightforward: "Here's what I've got, this is what I want, what are you going to do for me?" Once on a Florida vacation, she and her family stopped at a hotel looking for lodging. As she waited at the front desk, the manager told the couple ahead of her that rooms were \$75 a night. They left, disappointed. Smith wasn't prepared to spend that much, either, but she stood her ground.

"I just walked up and said, 'I'll pay you fifty-five dollars a night. That's all the money I have, but we want to stay in this hotel,'" she recalls. "And he said, 'OK.'"

Many Americans wouldn't dream of asking for a better price, says Peter Goodman, coauthor of *The Haggler's Handbook: One Hour to Negotiating Power*. They're unaware of the possibility, leery of being rejected, or uncomfortable about breaking what they assume are the unwritten rules of the marketplace.

continued on page 60

## When are your best opportunities for haggling?

- When you're buying more than one of something, such as a pair of upholstered chairs or a whole case of chickens for a big barbecue. You might also haggle, for instance, over a washer-and-dryer set.
- When the item you want is scratched, chipped, stained, bent, outdated, or otherwise flawed. You can even ask if there's anything in

the back room that the seller might want taken off his hands.

- When the item is selling for less somewhere else. Say you see an advertisement for a particular pair of boots on sale at a store across town. Present the ad at a more convenient store, and ask to buy the same boots at the sale price.
- When the item recently has been

on sale at that store. Also, ask if a sale is coming up. And if you discover something marked down just after you bought it at full price, present the receipt and ask to get the difference refunded.

- When the store is independently owned, or part of a local chain. Many national chains have pricing systems that don't allow haggling.



## Be prepared: tips for successful haggling

- Talk to someone with the authority to negotiate: the store owner, manager, or perhaps a sales clerk working on commission.
- Go early in the morning, or during bad weather, or whenever there will be fewer customers in the store. The merchant likely will be more eager to make the sale and less concerned that others will overhear and demand similar deals.
- Know how much the item costs at other stores, read advertisements, or consult *Consumer Reports* before wading into the fray.
- Get to know the merchants at stores where you shop regularly. They're more likely to offer deals to loyal customers.
- Ask for a discount when you pay cash. Shopkeepers must pay a fee (around 2 percent of the transaction price) to process credit card sales.
- If the seller won't budge on price, ask him to throw in some "extras," such as some blank tapes to go with a cassette player or soft drinks with the pizzas for your softball team. At a hotel or car-rental agency, ask for a free upgrade.
- You'll hold the most bargaining power when you're prepared to walk away empty-handed, if necessary.

## Haggling

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Habitual hagglers aren't embarrassed. They don't worry about how a salesman will react or about what will happen if a request is turned down. "The worst they can do is say 'No,'" Smith says. "Or they can laugh at you. But there's nothing else they can do, and I can handle that."

In fact, merchants are usually good-natured about offers made with humor and charm, says Mark Geinopolos, a Milwaukee computer salesman, who uses those qualities to land deals on airline tickets, groceries, restaurant meals, and doctor bills. He even haggled successfully over expenses for his 1991 wedding, from tuxedos to hotel rooms.

"Always be nice and friendly about it," Geinopolos advises. "Don't be demanding. It's a win-win situation."

### When you're wasting your time

Still, you can be as charming as Cary Grant and be an absolute flop at haggling if you're shopping in a store that forbids it. Many do.

The Pottery Barn, the big home furnishings chain, won't give special discounts unless a piece of merchandise is damaged or the buyer is a commercial customer,

such as a restaurant, and likely to make a big purchase. "We very nicely say, 'No, we're not allowed to do that,'" says Diane Adler of the chain's store in Princeton, New Jersey.

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### Haggling goes only so far

Haggling doesn't always produce the most savings, as I discovered in the unpainted-furniture shop. Braced by my first haggling triumph, I went a step further. When the manager told me that delivery of my two dressers would cost \$40, I balked. "Gee, that's kind of steep," I said. "Especially because I only live about five minutes from here." The man nodded sympathetically. "I guess I could just throw them in the back of my truck and drop them off," he said. "I could do it for thirty dollars."

Bingo! Another \$10 saved, an extra 25-percent discount I wouldn't ordinarily have considered requesting. And once again, all I'd had to do was ask.

On the other hand, \$30 is \$30, and there's still money to be saved the old-fashioned way. The dressers were small enough to fit in the back of my own car. I told him I could transport them myself. **fm**

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*Katy Read, a writer in Minneapolis, used her baggling skills when she and her husband bought a new home this year.*