

CASH FROM TRASH CAR BOOT SALES-THE MONEY SPINNER



INTRODUCTION

Every weekend thousands of normally sane individuals gather in some of the most uninviting of places, in often atrocious weather conditions, intent solely on jostling with like-minded people for possession of items long since abandoned. What am I taking about? Why, car boot sales, of course!

They were virtually unheard of a few years ago, but now never a week goes by without finding a deluge of similar events vying for prominence in the classified pages of the local press.

Village Halls, Auction Rooms, Church Halls, Pub Car Parks; these are but a few of the places that regularly play host to the rapidly growing great British pastime - Collecting! And just about anything and everything will satisfy collectors, hoarders, and those who merely want to acquire goods and household items: books, plates, cutlery, toys, old tools, clothes, you name it, at car boot sales you can buy it.

Prices vary as widely as the quality and quantity of the goods on offer, from a few pence to many pounds, but unlike many sales venues, there will almost always be something at the car boot sale to interest collector and hoarder alike.

All this of course, considers only the buyer's side of the fence, but buyers obviously need sellers, and on this other side are some of the most enterprising and profitable small businesses, with speedy turnovers and often massive profit margins.

With so many venues available and an endless supply and range of stock, it may be hard to accept that room will be available for even one more trader, yet this is indeed the case. Not all dealers choose to attend events on a regular basis, many viewing the car boot fairs as no more than a means of disposing of items from a recent one-off attic clearing exercise. There are others who consider it a spare-time venture only and will build up their stocks, perhaps over several weeks or months, in readiness for one particular event.

Increasingly antiques and bric-a-brac dealers have realised the potential these sales offer as a means of unloading their less quality items, some supplementing their trading at Antiques and Collectors' Fairs, even shops, with a few well-chosen outdoor venues.

For most dealers, less than £100 takings from a boot sale would spell disappointment, unless of course, the weather or some coinciding event, such as Wimbledon, contributed to a low customer turnout. When you consider the small outlay for stock and the low business overheads, even a 'disappointing' £90 represents a tidy profit for a day's work. The fluctuating rewards might not suit those supporting a family, but it can provide a very useful second or spare-time income. Amongst other advantages the car boot sale offers is the chance to be your own boss, working when and for as long as you choose, where you wish, selling whatever takes your fancy, and with no boss or work mates to create pressure or stress.

Sounds ideal, doesn't it, for anyone seeking an exit from the 'Rat Race'? But don't be deceived. It does require some effort on the trader's part. Competition exists: for customers, goods, even venues and trading pitches. Consequently a professionalism has developed, many regular traders trying all manner of ways in which to increase their share of the profits, getting to the venue sometimes hours in advance of others to select a prime position, customising their vehicles and even buying new ones to suit, paying great detail to selection and layout of goods, and hounding new traders for the pick of their better goods.

I mentioned 'vehicles' in the last paragraph and that's what you'd think a car boot sale trader would need as perhaps his most essential possession. Strangely though, this is not always true, and we've recently see the emergence of 'Table Top' fairs existing alongside the car boot sales. Traders without transport can turn up with their goods, by whatever means, erect their table (usually a folding wallpaper-pasting table), put a cloth cover on it, set out their goods and off they go!

SO WHERE DO I START

First and foremost, you must, if you haven't done so already, visit as many of those venues you wish to join forces with. Arrive early if you can, watch the traders drive in and set up. Look around at what's for sale and more importantly at what is actually selling. Where do the crowds tend to flock? Around those tatty old clothes, or that pile of toys offered appropriately, just before Christmas?

Your local newspapers, free papers, and shop windows will keep you informed of what venues are available. Some are regular weekly events, others once-off. If 'tied' to such as a rally or carnival, the latter can be extremely lucrative propositions, but otherwise, BEWARE! The regular weekly events tend to have an established and usually growing clientele on both the buying and selling sides.

They are long-established events and some, I know, are extremely viable business propositions. They must be, for I know several bric-a-brac and antique dealers who have forsaken their normal attendance's at fleamarkets, even quality fairs, in favour of spending every Saturday on our local racecourse, selling anything from bulky packets of elastic bands, to toys, stamps, books, cutlery, some even specialising in 'lower end of the market' antiques.

Once you become established in one or two venues you will find out through experience, or the advice of fellow traders, just where the best events are. Fellow traders, incidentally, with the exception of a small minority, are not normally averse to pass on many of their secrets and to help the newcomer make the best of his chances. They might though expect something in return, for instance trade discounts (normally 10%), or first pick of your goods, but these are normal practices between traders, and a small price to pay for the information they impart to you.

HOW DO I START

You can remember sell almost anything, the most obvious items being excluded, for instance animals, and foodstuffs in most instances. The organiser will advise you as to what you can not sell, as will your local authority Trading Standards Department.

Some things are better sellers than others, some less bulky to transport, some take up more valuable stall space than others, some are more durable and so on. These considerations you will learn through experience and they shouldn't concern you too much at the beginning. Just don't go trying to hump four poster beds to such as the local school car park for a fund-raising event.

It's possible with car boot sales, to start a lucrative sideline with no capital other than the petrol to get you to your first event and the fee to pay for your pitch. The latter incidentally often amounts to £6, normally a car costing slightly less than a van.

The fact that some take vans must prove the viability of these sales venues as business ventures. But to get back to the point, starting with little or no capital normally necessitates cleaning out your own garage and attic and those of friends, relatives and neighbours. You then take along all but absolute rubbish (destined for the dustbin), price it, sell it, and where applicable return an agreed percentage of the takings to the original owner.

With the money you've made, you buy more stock, sell it, buy more, and so on, until your volume, range and quality of stock is adequate and you can then consider taking a 'cut' of the profits, remembering always to plough something back for future stock purchases.

WHERE ELSE CAN I OBTAIN STOCK

Unlike many retailers you will almost certainly find no difficulty in obtaining suitable stock, both in terms of quality and price. The sources for obtaining stock are many and varied and include:

Other car boot traders, particularly newcomers and once-off visitors

Collectors' Fairs

Fleamarkets

Charity Shops

Jumble Sales

Church and School Fetes

Auctions

Wholesalers

The Classified Adverts in Local papers

By advertising for it Yourself

At the start of the day's trading many 'car booters' find themselves inundated with buyers, to the extent they find it impossible to set up stall. For many this most profitable part of the day will find traders swooping particularly upon first-timers and irregular visitors, hoping to find amongst their wares, some choice bargains which will be hastily re-priced and given pride of place on their own stalls. Amongst traders 'bargaining' is common, many expecting trade discount, usually of 10%. Personally I always give this reduction to trade hoping to secure regular custom and not often being disappointed. I find too, that being fair with fellow traders brings another advantage in that they often consider me first for items falling within my scope but outside of theirs. As you grow in experience you will become aware of customers' particular interests and can then search other dealers' stocks for suitable items, unless of course they have the same customers and it is unlikely therefore that you will be able to buy and sell anything at a profit.

Once-off traders tend to price their items low and may be prepared to lower them further as the day progresses, since they usually want to sell everything at one go and are reluctant to transport items home, only to have them clutter places they were trying to evacuate them from in the first place.

Collectors' fairs and fleamarkets tend almost invariably to fall midway between jumble sales and antique fairs, no disrespect intended to any of these outlets. All will be advertised in the local papers and a visit very early in the day will often reward you well, since fellow traders will be taking advantage of the proceedings to replenish their stock.

Stick to what you know will yield a profit. I usually work on paying half of what I intend to sell for, thereby allowing me some leeway for trade discount to my buyers, and to take breakage's and mark-downs into consideration. At the end of the day, taking all of these things into account most traders average a profit of 50% on the majority of items.

Charity sales and jumble sales are excellent sources for stock acquisitions, as are church fairs and school fetes. These two will be advertised in local papers and shop windows. Keep a careful note of all potential venues, and plan to visit as many as time and other commitments will allow.

Auctions are the possibly the happiest of hunting grounds for the car boot trader and his counterparts at the fleamarkets and collectors' fairs. Surprisingly, the novice can be extremely apprehensive of even visiting an auction, fearing that the slightest body movement might render him the proud owner of 'Lot Number....' In my opinion, this is extremely unlikely to happen, and I truly believe this misconception was formulated by auction regulars, keen to protect their interests and with the intention of keeping the opposition as low as possible. In my experience of auctions, which I admit isn't vast, I have never seen anything knocked down to an unsuspecting bidder; the auctioneer always makes certain that what he believes could be a bid, is in fact so.

Auctions differ greatly in terms of what they deal in, the clientele they attract, and the professionalism with which their staff conduct themselves. Great works of art and highly prized pieces of antiquity rarely appear in your local back street auction rooms, and similarly a tea tray of bric-a-brac will not be given house room in the larger auction rooms which specialise in selling fewer, but more select items at higher prices, and consequently attract very few of the car boot and flea market fraternity. Our place for the better bargains, is the small auction room with its sometimes conflicting standards, where we must unfortunately be content to jostle with hundreds of fellow bargain seekers, but all to good avail, for that tea tray of goodies,, be they teapots or odd glasses will fill many a gap on our pasting tables, usually costing little, and consequently yielding a good profit margin.

As always, visit a few auctions in advance of a genuine bidding session, just to see for yourself what really happens. Some will let you take your goods home minutes after they are knocked down to you, whilst others stipulate that nothing can be removed until the sale is over. Some establishments require evidence of your bank allowing cheque for higher values to be cleared, others take almost all cheques if covered by a current bank card. Make sure in advance of buying anything just what the individual requirements are in this respect. Remember too that on top of the price you have bid for any particular item you will almost certainly be charged V.A.T and a Buyer's Commission, both of which can increase the cost of your purchase significantly. So check before you bid and take these added costs into account when assessing the worth of any prospective purchases.

Wholesalers up and down the country carry many goods of use to car boot traders, some though fewer, specialising in second-hand goods. These firms will advertise their services in the local and county press, and in such as 'Exchange & Mart' and 'The Trader'. Some will require you to spend a minimum amount, to discourage the private buyer or the time-wasting browser, so again, check in advance.

The classified advertisements in local papers will reveal many potentially suitable items, and if from a private source they may indeed be just what you are looking for. Be careful though, for sometimes that job lot of bric-a-brac or children's clothes and toys might have been placed by a fellow trader, anxious to rid himself of stock that simply hasn't sold. Experience will tell you what will sell and what won't, so in the early days you must content yourself with a few mistakes, remembering of course that you can always try the classified sections yourself to sell surplus stock, even if you just break even or sometimes incur a small loss. These advertisements are often free and represent an additional market place for your goods, and not only those that have been around for a long time.

You could also try advertising for stock in the 'Articles Wanted' section of the local press, remembering of course you'll most likely require bulk purchases to warrant the time and trouble it takes to visit prospective sellers.

WHAT SHOULD I SELL AND FOR HOW MUCH?

As mentioned earlier, the answer is 'almost anything'. Some advantages exist in specialising, perhaps the biggest being that of less competition for stock. But by specialising you will rule out much of the passing trade upon which many traders depend. The majority of visitors to a car boot sale have no particular purchases in mind. They have their eyes open for a bargain but what form it takes often depends upon their frame of mind at the time.

Toys seem to be good sellers, as do ornaments and books. Domestic tools and hardware are in demand perhaps due to the high prices we must pay to buy them new. Nothing will suffice for your own market study of what people appear to be buying and which trader seem to attract the greatest crowds. Provide a similar service and stock and you really can't go far wrong.

Traders with young children can take advantage of a steady stream of cast-off toys and clothes, and the green-fingered amongst us will no doubt find little trouble in keeping up with demand for low-cost plant cuttings. My own specialism is ephemera of the paper variety, and I seek to offer a constantly changing stocks of old postcards, magazines, theatre programmes, tickets, advertisements and so on.

Be constantly on the look-out for items you can repair or renovate. A boxful of picture frames might look anything but inviting in that dingy auction room, but imagine what they could do for a few well-chosen and extremely cheap magazine advertisements or prints. Paperback books seem to be enjoying a second life at many venues.

I know of regular traders who specialise in antiques, gardening products and produce, others with only books or toys, pictures, craftwork, cosmetics and curios. It really is up to you what you sell and I think a mark-up of between 50% and 100% makes for a fairly quick turnover and allows you to drop your price for trade discounts, breakage's and stock that is sticking.

You must be prepared to lower the price of items that have been around for too long. Just how long you're prepared to give each item is up to you, bearing in mind the number of sales you take them to. Perhaps after half a dozen sales you may consider it appropriate to lower the price of some older items to make way for new.

At the car boot sales, with the 'rummagers' out in full force, noting attracts more than a pile of goodies, poking haphazardly out of a plastic storage box and offered with an 'everything for...' tag stuck to the front.

As a last resort, take unwanted stock to the local auction room even if only to reap a pound or two for your efforts. Customers will start flocking again to a display of new stock once the stale items have stopped hogging valuable stall space.

Price everything on your stall. Small self-adhesive labels are ideal and can be purchased at most newsagents and stationers. Be careful of items that might be damaged even by the lightest of stickers, for example ornaments with a hand-painted finish. Some labels tend to stick with the intention of never departing the scene. Fortunately not many fit into this category but it's wise to test a few - just to be on the safe side. Pricing your goods in advance allows you to remember what you need to take to incur a profit, and from experience I know browsers and intending customers are often reluctant to ask the price of an article, preferring instead to saunter off in search of alternative items - with a price tag!

To avoid pricing and re-pricing items and to satisfy the rummagers amongst their customers, many traders sell their stock at 'Everything for.....pence'. Everything at this price is placed in the appropriate box or boxes. Obviously too many different prices will cause chaos and confusion, so it's best to stick to a few prices, perhaps 20p, 50p and £1. A small table for individually priced items may be placed alongside.

Haggling has long been one of the most common features of the car boot sale, often as an end in itself I suspect, as opposed to a need to acquire the item more cheaply. Be prepared for this but stick always to a pre-determined price below which you will not go except to effect the sale of an item which is due shortly for salesroom status, or perhaps bulky items which you would prefer not to transport home - again! Where possible have a code on your price tag to indicate what you paid for an item and if the time is right you might consider letting it go for a little, sometimes no profit - simply to get rid of it. Your code could be such as: 'F289' to indicate the item was purchased at a flea market for £2 in 1989. Whatever serves the purpose of jogging your memory will suffice but I always prefer that the code is unlikely to be cracked by the customer. The 'F' in the example code is for little reason other than to add to the complexity for attempting code-busters.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Make the day's work as easy for yourself as possible. Instead of carrying precariously stacked 'about to give way at any second' cardboard boxes, invest in some of those handy stacking plastic containers most supermarkets stock nowadays. Inbuilt handles make them easy to carry, and being durable they offer more protection to your stock. They also look more professional, not something that might increase your profits, but will certainly do a lot for your ego. At a price of a few pounds each I can't understand why some traders still seem to insist on battling with cardboard boxes and carrier bag that promise shortly to collapse under the strain.

Professionalism comes from paying attention to minor details, like putting a cloth on your stall before displaying anything. An old cloth or curtain (preferably not brightly coloured or patterned) is adequate. The bare boards I'm afraid, do nothing to aid your chances of a sale, and showing you care about the appearance of your stall serves to show you also care about the quality of your goods and service. Any valuable items should be kept towards the back of your stall, or under a glass top if possible, to deter pilferers. Those who want a closer look will ask you for assistance.

Working outside in the summer might be seen as providing an ideal working environment, but in the winter it's an entirely different story. That same freezing cold that's causing your teeth to chatter and convinces you your finger ends have gone, could also be the reason for a marked lack of customers. If you decide to persevere trading through the bad months, do all you can to make the job as comfortable as possible. Always, but always, have plenty of food and drink, I park next to the food vans on sites.

Company is advisable to help you through the long days (congenial company that is), and is essential if you wish to roam around looking for stock on other stalls. Take someone you trust to be vigilant and to treat your customers well. I don't believe the trading side of the stall is the place for young children and pets; there's simply not enough to occupy them, and boredom will ensue with its inevitable distractions for you. Taking older children might be a way of enlisting help, whilst at the same time allowing them to learn the rudiments of business and the importance of good planning and customer relations.

Many other tips, techniques and practices you'll learn from experience and those around you. Car-booting really can be a rewarding activity, both financially, and in terms of the friends you'll make on either side of the counter, so I sincerely hope I've helped you on the first steps to success in this most enjoyable of businesses.