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Let's Not Make a Deal

When did Americans turn into insufferable hagglers? Spare me the Craigslist lowballers.

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INSTRUCTIONS: This author describes a change in an industry's general environment. What is the industry and what is the change (there may be more than one)? Why do you think this change occurred?

You've no doubt been at a multigenerational family dinner when one of the young ones says he's off to some place like Egypt or Turkey. The elders always chime in with, "When you're shopping at the bazaar, be sure to bargain. It's expected."

Haggling over price may be culturally ingrained in other parts of the world, but it hasn't been part of the American character. Now, though, perhaps because of the influence of Internet auctions, and a perpetually flooded inbox with big-name retailers promising an extra 30% off plus free shipping, our growing obsession with getting a bargain may actually be turning us into insufferable cheapskates. Call it the bargain backfire.

Recently I decided to redo my apartment and so put an assortment of unwanted rugs, lamps, tables and chairs on Craigslist. I've used the popular bulletin-board site since it was founded in San Francisco in the 1990s. But it had been a while since my last foray. I didn't realize that Craigslist has become a hotbed of pushy tightwads trying to get something for nothing.

No sooner had I posted an item from my apartment than an email came in offering 50% of the asking price. Aggressive tactic, I thought, since the ad had only been running for 40 minutes. Another item, priced at \$100, brought out a relentless lowballer so avaricious that, when he finally said he could do \$70 but not \$80 without his wife killing him, I told him that if the

stability of his marriage is riding on 10 bucks then maybe he should save his money for counseling.

Another would-be buyer's opening gambit was to say that she had a disabled friend for whom my slightly fashionable side table (paid \$275, asked \$50) would be just perfect, but that she would need to factor in paying for a train and bus ride, so "what is the absolute lowest you're willing to accept?" I said I was trying to raise money for a friend who needed a heart transplant and asked what was the absolute highest she was willing to fork over.

Bargaining exists in an ethical gray area, and most Americans much prefer the clear black and white of a price tag. "We'll beat anyone's advertised price" is a mantra of television advertising for local businesses. The keyword there is "advertised." If a price appears in print, it's as if God himself has seen it. Didn't our elders teach us that if we ever go to pay for something and the cashier says that the item has the wrong price tag on it, we should insist that the store is morally obligated to sell it for the tag price, since it was their mistake?

Antipathy to bargaining is why Americans quake with anxiety over the purchase of an automobile; always afraid they're going to be, shall we say, taken for a ride. The whole charade of dealerships artificially inflating the asking price, then having a sharky salesman say, "Come on, we both know you're not going to pay that much" is a tedious and dirty process for us straightforward types who think it would be much simpler if they priced the car fairly in the first place.

Back on the apartment front: After a few days of being hit by aggressive lowballing I realized that whatever good the sales might do for my redecorating budget was far outweighed by the unpleasantness of the bargaining. When the haggling email exchanges reached their crescendo, I informed my adversaries that it would bring me more pleasure to leave the items on the sidewalk to be scooped up by a passerby than to accept the buyer's paltry offer.

And that's exactly what I did in the end. The items had been advertised fairly (had I wanted them, I would have gladly paid my own asking price). But in the effort to get something as

cheaply as possible—perhaps for the satisfaction of feeling they’d won a battle—my would-be buyers only ensured that they didn’t get the item at all, while some lucky fellow got it free.

There was one glimmer of hope in the whole experience. A recent college graduate from upstate came over to check out a large oriental-style rug for his new room. We spent considerable time rolling it evenly and figuring out how to get it into his car on a snowy day, and we hadn’t even done the deal yet. So when it came time to reach for the wad of \$20s in his front pocket, the kid handed over the full asking price. “I was going to try to bargain you down,” he said, “but I hate it when people do that to me.”

I smiled and didn’t even count the money.

End