

ESTATE SALE RETAIL BEST PRACTICES

1/22

This autumn I provided retail consulting services to my friend and colleague Glen Leiner, president of Glen Leiner Estate Services, specializing in estate sale services for a wide variety of clients in the United States for over two decades. Glen has a background in architectural history, regulatory preservation, and documentary film work that informs his research on unusual categories of merchandise. As I worked with him, I focused on enriching the execution of the customer experience, the visual presentation, merchandise management, and daily operations.



During these multiday liquidation events, I learned plenty about the history and value of several categories of merchandise, including art, porcelain, silverware, antique furniture, and carpets, to name a few. Understanding the history and composition of items in these categories drove the value and level of pricing flexibility necessary in some instances to close the sale.

As each day unfolded in a beautiful home in the Bronx, and later the following month in a four-story brownstone in Brooklyn, I came to the realization that despite the multitude of retail theatrical stage sets that exist, the core disciplines within them are pretty much the same. With prior professional experience in all sorts of retail expressions (luxury boutiques, monobrand chains, off-price outlets, warehouse sales, pop-ups, museums, and airports), my initial impression was that estate sale events were much the same, except for the layout and product mix.

I learned from Glen that in addition to challenges with a multilevel floorplan and the condition and pricing of merchandise assortments, there were a few customer and online variations as well. The customers shopping estate sales are often resellers and dealers, which usually drives a more intensified exchange in terms of pricing. There are

often specialized wholesale deal requests, particularly if multiple pricier items are involved. During the last two pandemic years, estate sale traffic has grown with a heavier reliance on online sale and auction platforms, which has required greater focus on written descriptions and photography.

Despite some of the subtle variations, as always, a great shopping event starts with assembling the best team to host—a group of individuals, each with their own talents and experiences, to build and provide an enticing platform in which to shop. Glen shared his extensive product knowledge of a multitude of merchandise categories in addition to his acumen of estate sale protocols and understanding of customer expectations. I brought the store-based disciplines into each house, for example, understanding the physical platforms, reviewing the merchandise to be presented, and creating floorplans that would ensure customers ventured up and down a flight of stairs, into a kitchen, or outside to a patio to consider the assortments and make purchases. Other members of the team brought their range of skills to the estate sales, which all-combined drove the success of these events.

As you can imagine, the range of products was extensive too—from vintage clothing to silverware to paintings to patio furniture and so much more—an incredible mix of possessions from the owners' lifetimes. Having to create appealing visual presentations with sensible adjacencies that provided enough interest for the customers to journey throughout each estate sale was a great test of merchandising skill.

As part of the landscape, well-placed signage mattered, displaying relevant information to support dialogue and purchases. Each day hundreds of units were sold and, as expected, the floor would require a fresh replenishment of remaining merchandise displayed in an appealing and attractive manner. This was not a simple task in certain cases, as some of the rooms contained a mix of the remaining items.

Last but surely not least, even though the estate sale locations were not stores on Madison Avenue, the most important consideration was the customer experience. Some might argue that for an estate sale one should just put out the goods and sit by the door to complete the sales transaction. Nothing could be further from the truth. Once the doors opened, we were on the shop floor, smiling, engaging, and making our guests feel comfortable during their visit. The range of people that came through the sales was broad—local neighbors, professional resellers, young sustainable shoppers, and tourists.

As always, no matter what the selling stage set (boutique, warehouse, airplane, hotel, restaurant, etc.), the core elements that drive success are leading an outstanding team, building a distinct merchandise/service offering, and hosting an exceptional customer experience.

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