

Guide to Good Yard Sales

Yard Sales, whether on the church lawn or parish hall, can accomplish several things at the same time. They are, of course, supposed to raise money for the church or for a special cause, often outreach projects. In many cases, churches also hope to provide low-income people an opportunity to buy things at an affordable price. But there is a third reason to hold a yard sale that most churches overlook – it's an evangelism opportunity. There are a few things you can do to maximize what you accomplish.

Evangelism

A yard sale is a time when people who might never otherwise visit your church have an opportunity to check you out without looking like that's what they are doing. So let's make it easy for them to see the church as well as the goods. Open your church and have someone present to welcome people (and also keep an eye on things, give directions to restrooms, etc.). Set up a way to play recorded religious music or have your organist play the organ – especially if it is a good instrument. Do mini-concerts for a few minutes on the half-hour. If you have an historic building you can offer tours. But in all cases, open up your church. People are often interested in seeing what the inside of that church they drive by all of the time looks like.

Even more importantly, recruit parishioners whose sole role is to build relationships with people who come to shop. Instead of selling whole pies or cakes, sell individual servings along with drinks. Set up tables and encourage parishioners to be table hosts. Their role is to engage people in conversation, get to know them, invite them to share their stories – and at the end of the conversation, gently invite them to church. Most people visit a church because someone they know invited them. So you need to get to know people, build an initial relationship with them before you earn the right to invite them. Give each parishioner a business card (printed on pre-perforated sheets you run through the laser printer or from a printing company) – put the church name, address, contact information on the front and service/program times on the back.

Low-cost goods for the poor

If your goal is to support low-income people you need to think about when, where and how they might learn about your event and even how they might get to it. Contact local agencies that serve the poor, ask if you can post a flyer in grocery stores in low income neighborhoods and reach out to other faith groups in those area. Another good strategy is to advertise that an hour before the end of the sale you will switch to a "\$1 a bag" sale. Provide shoppers with brown paper bags and encourage them to fill it with whatever they need.

Raising money for outreach projects

Fundraising events that support outreach projects are especially attractive to shoppers. They can do good by purchasing what they want or need. So they get a bigger bang for their buck! If you are used to funding outreach projects through your budget, reduce or eliminate that budget item and move those project to a fundraiser like a yard sale. Then use the yard sale as an opportunity to educate people about the project. This is a good opportunity to involve parishioners who might not want to (or aren't able to) help on yard sale day. Invite individuals or groups to design a variety of ways to tell shoppers about your outreach project(s). Posters, display tables, videos, pop-up dramatic performances, songs, brochures you slip into each shoppers bag are just some ways you can educate people. This is a good time to engage Sunday School children, your Youth Group or other groups in the church to develop creative ways to tell the story about your project. And don't forget to solicit money directly – at the checkout counter, ask people if they would like to contribute. Most people won't give anything – but some will contribute generously. Give them that opportunity.

Tips for minimizing work and maximizing income

There are a number of things you can do to make a yard sale easier to host and increase the amount of money you raise. It's always good to encourage people to donate items that are in demand. Send out some scouts to visit other yard sales and ask what's selling and what isn't selling. Make a list of what types of items you will or will not accept. That will prevent you from getting lots of things you can't sell.

Ask for donations from stores

Don't assume that you can only get used goods for your yard sale. Many stores are happy to donate their unsalable items to you. They get a tax write-off for the full value of the item, which is often more than they can get by marking it down or writing it off. Grocery stores sometimes have damaged canned goods or boxed items that are less than perfect. Clothing and general merchandise stores are good sources for contributions but don't hesitate to also ask hardware stores, drug stores and specialty stores for a contribution. Building supplies and materials, including leftover lumber, old tools, gutter segments, and remainders of stone or marble are some of the hottest items in some areas. Remember to send stores a thank you note with a list of what they donated so they can use that for tax purposes.

Pricing Tips

The best way to reduce the amount of work is to skip pricing each item. Set up tables and label each one by type of sale item and put one set price on the table: Men's pants \$3, Shoes, \$5, Dishes, Glasses, Cups, \$.50 or 3 for \$1; Pots and Pans, \$3, etc. When people donate items, encourage them (especially your members) to put them on the proper table and quickly sort whatever is dropped off at the church onto the tables. If you have people who like to

neaten things, turn them loose on the tables. But also recognize that some people like pawing through a pile to find that one gem. So, for example, you can dump children's sweaters in big box.

If you have people who are good at handling pricing-on-the-fly, assign one person to a couple of tables and let them accept whatever people offer. People often offer more than what you'd ask for anyway and that balances out the few people who offer less. Set bottom prices for things by category (e.g., no less than \$2 for shoes) and then ask people what they will offer, reminding them that their payment goes to support the church or the outreach project. If people won't name a price, you can then suggest one. Start with higher prices early in the day (when dealers show up) and come down during the day. On one hand, you don't want to underprice your items – on the other hand, whatever you get is more than you had at the beginning of the day!

If you are trying to think of a minimum to accept remember the yard sale rule: sell almost-new items at 50 percent of retail; slightly used items at 25-30 percent of retail; and used items at 10 percent of retail – provided that the item was bought recently and is something that the average people would want. Don't expect to get much for some obscure textbook you bought 15 years ago for \$75 even if it is almost-new. If you get items that are a lost cause, put out a "free" box and let people take the stuff you aren't going to be able to sell anyway.

Advertise your sale

One of the most important things you need to do is to advertise your sale – anywhere and everywhere. Specify "No Dealers" or be prepared to set your price points high for the first two hours. Post ads on Craigslist, eBay Classifieds, YardSaleSearch and GarageSaleHunter. If you have large ticket items, list them separate on a place like Craigslist complete with pictures. People coming to yard sales aren't looking for a \$300 dining room set – but you can get them to buy that before or during the sale if you let them know it will be for sale.

Post your sale on FaceBook, Twitter and Instagram and encourage your parishioners to help spread the word by linking to the announcement. Ask your city about the rules you need to follow (and while you're there, find out if you need a license to hold the sale) – and, if it is allowed, put posters around town (make sure you take them down afterwards). Don't staple or nail them to telephone poles (hazard for workers) or trees. Use stakes to post them in grassways (ask permission) or tape them to poles.

Distribute flyers to local stores, senior centers, community centers and organizations (recreational, social, service, etc.). And, of course, ask your local newspaper and radio if they will list it as a public service ad. Again,

you're more likely to get some press interest if you are raising money for some cause – even if that is church related such as raising money for a playground at the church. If you have a good story, tell it – and include a picture wherever you can! Also, you don't have to designate all of the funds raised to outreach – just make sure you say “a portion of your purchase goes to support ABC.”

On the day of the sale put up directional signs with arrows pointing the way. Send people out in multiple directions and go out quite a ways – people will follow signs to a sale. Buy signs or get people to make them. Brown paper bags also work – put rocks on the bottom, stuff with newspaper or those foam peanuts you don't know how to get rid of (in a seal plastic bag so they don't blow all over the neighborhood or staple or tape the top securely) and then just drop them off. Make sure your homemade sign makers use the strongest colors of crayons or permanent markers (so they don't run if they get wet) – and to make the letters big and fat so you can see them passing by at 35 MPH. Don't add a bunch of decorations like flowers and birds (they're distracting!). But do make them all look alike so people know they are following your signs vs. someone else's. The best image to include is a big arrow pointing the way. Red and black are the best colors followed by dark blue. Avoid yellow, pink, pastels of any color. Orange, green and brown (especially in combination) say “Halloween” more than “Yard Sale.” Oh yes, and don't add “quotation marks” around words on a sign....they also are distracting.

Welcome shoppers and be friendly

People buy more when you are nice to them. That might sound obvious, but church people sometimes are so busy they forget to be warm, welcoming and helpful. Have people available to welcome shoppers, give directions and assist in loading big items into cars. Label the way to the restroom clearly and make it a hospitable place. Provide a safe, supervised but very visible, public play space for children so parents can shop without tending to children (but ideally can glance over and see that they are OK). Invite people to rest and enjoy a treat in the café. Put attractive and big items up front (preferably outside) and/or close to the café. Provide a dressing room for women to try on clothes (men generally don't need one) – and have two people serve as an attendant both to prevent theft and to shuttle unwanted items back to the right table. Smile. Say “thank you.”

Dealing with Dealers

Serious shoppers and dealers are why you want to start with your prices at the highest point at the beginning of the sale. Dealers, in particular, will show up early (often before you're officially “open”) and scoop up the best items, so you might as well get the best price from them. They will let you know if your price is too high – if they offer a much lower price, come down just a bit and see how far up they will go. If they say “no” and look like they will leave,

ask what their top offer is. Then ask if they can go a bit higher than that to benefit the church or your outreach project. Some people really like bargaining – dealers are usually very good at knowing how high they can go and still make a profit later. But they also provide a service – if the dealers snatch up items happily without hesitation or negotiation, you know you underpriced them. If two or three come by, are interested in your items but say that your prices are too high and leave, they're probably right. If they just look things over and move on quickly, it means you don't have items that have much resale value. Dealers are business people – if you have one in your parish or a friend of the parish, they are a gold mine of information when it comes to pricing.

You also can designate “No Dealers” and post signs to that effect – most dealers will honor that. You may have to explain that you are trying to help people and raise money, not contribute to a business. This is especially useful if you choose to go the route of not pricing items but rather ask for donations – or set up and label tables and then sort things into broad categories (\$5 for men's trousers, \$3 for children's shoes, etc.)

Start early

Start your sale early (6 or 7 am) on Friday morning. You'll be able to catch people on their way to work or taking children to school and you'll have less competition from other sales. And you're more likely to get serious shoppers – and, of course, dealers. Friday and Saturday are the best yard sale days. You can use Sunday after church as the “closeout” time since that's when your parishioners are going to be there anyways. Encourage them to bring family, friends and neighbors and have the last hour a “stuff a bag for \$2” time to help clear out whatever's left over. You can also arrange for the Salvation Army, Goodwill or Savers to pick up whatever's left over. Some places, like Savers, will even pay you a per-pound amount for what they collect. Depending on where you're located, you can even just set thing out along the curb with a “FREE” sign on it – it isn't unusual to have everything leftover just disappear in a matter of hours.

Security

Make sure you keep an eye on things and especially that you guard the cash box. Have someone take money out of the cash box and move it to a secure place several times during the day. Make sure valuables around the church are locked up or that areas of the church are either locked or have someone on duty as a security person. You don't want to make money at a yard sale that you lose to theft!

Enjoy!

Encourage your team to have a good time – and think about what might help make this event enjoyable. Maybe that means providing breakfast. Or having something silly that happens during the day – especially if you have a

comedian, a drama group, a bunch of folks who burst in to jig in the middle of things, the choir that plans a surprise a flash-mob choral rendition, a group that cleans everyone's car windshield during the sale, fresh baked chocolate cookies for the team at the end of the day, etc. The possibilities are endless! But come up with something that rewards, amuses and encourages your team. This is another good way to engage members of the congregation who might otherwise not show up to help. But they might be willing to show up with ten pizzas for lunch.

Thank everyone who helped. Hand-written notes are still a good thing. But so is just a simple, sincere "thank you." It is especially important that your clergy are present, involved and take the time to thank everyone for their efforts.

Finally, don't forget to celebrate and communicate. Tell the good news at the next worship service(s) and publish the results (and thank you's) in your newsletter. Name the people who led the effort. Take pictures and post them on the church bulletin board and website. If you were raising money for some specific project, tell that story – "we raised \$x that enabled us to do Y and it make Z difference for this person/these people." If possible, tell a personal story....even if you need to disguise it a bit. "When we took the X to Y agency, one woman said....and we saw/heard...." Make it personal and, if at all possible, make it inspirational. You want your congregation to know that their work made a difference. Paint a picture to tell them how they did that.

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