

Sold on eBay

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Like many schemes that offer quick riches, buying and selling on eBay can be more challenging than many fortune hunters wish. You don't merely input your password, et voil, you are trading the Taj Mahal. The process is onerous, especially for sellers. Some entrepreneurs have simplified this for people who are willing to drop off their merchandise with them and the intermediaries in turn take care of the auction process and delivery.

But now there's an entrepreneur who has gone a couple steps further. She and her network will pick up the old computer or grandmother's pearls from you. Stella Kleiman of San Francisco also has developed her own software and accounting process, which has proven so simple a growing network of independent contractors uses her system, FoundValue, <http://www.foundvalue.com>

When John Cummings of Hercules discovered FoundValue, he was already an eBay power seller, racking up sales of at least \$10,000 a month. While software developers have jumped on the eBay bandwagon to refine the process — the site <http://www.auctionbytes.com/cab/pages/ams> has more than 40 software products supporting auctions on eBay and many competitors — Cummings liked FoundValue and became an independent contractor.



Foundvalue independent contractor John Cummings (left) photographs a large bird cage, which he is preparing to sell on eBay for Oakland resident Richard Lardner.

"There are lots of pieces of software that make the auction process easier for buyers but very few that make the auction process easy for consigners," Cummings said. "FoundValue is much easier. I load the merchandise right onto their platform. When you start the auction, the customers follow along with you automatically. I don't have to do my own accounting anymore. FoundValue cuts the checks for the customers."

Kleiman calls her business FoundValue because turning unused merchandise into cash is just that, she said. She had been doing business development for a high-tech company in Silicon Valley with a staff of 50, enduring a lot of stress and a 90-minute commute. She called it quits and moved to New York. "One day I found a watch of my husband's in the back of the car, and I decided to sell it on eBay. It turned out to be a collector's item, and we got a check for \$154 for it," she said. Getting that check hooked her. Soon, when people asked her what she was doing, she would say, "I'm selling oneBay." Likely as not, they would ask her, "Would you do it for me?"

Her business grew by word-of-mouth. Today, FoundValue has more than 250 independent contractors in 36 states. There are several in the Bay Area, and they are listed on the FoundValue Web site. When someone joins the FoundValue network, he or she must buy a kit for \$80 that contains a manual, a marketing kit and postcards. From then on, the specialist must pay a \$10 monthly fee. Other than that, all he or she needs is a digital camera, access to the Internet and a car. Unlike many franchises that charge tens of thousands of dollars to join, the bar for entry here is low. FoundValue is not a franchise; it's a network of independents.

"I wanted to be open to everyone. They get all the benefits of a franchise, but they are at home and they don't have the high startup costs. We own our own software platform and they get free online training. It's very easy to do this business," Kleiman said. The seller gets a bigger chunk of the profits than at regular consignment stores as well, she claims. eBay drop-off stores typically charge commissions of 35 to 40 percent for the first few hundred dollars of each item sold, with the percentage decreasing for bigger transactions.

Meanwhile, FoundValue network sellers, or "eSpecialists," take 35 percent of the first \$250 sold, 25 percent of the next sales up to \$750 and 15 percent for anything over that. Cummings is convinced because he went from being a lone operator to part of a network. Even though it's not in the formal contract with FoundValue, the organization passes leads onto him, he said. He likes helping people navigate the maze that is eBay — the San Jose-based company has more than 100 million registered members worldwide — positioning their merchandise to reach markets they could not have achieved on their own.

"I love selling things for people that are undervalued in one area and seeing them receive value in another. For instance, once I had a 1960 electric organ from Orinda whose owner couldn't sell it at all. But I got several bidders for it on eBay — even from as far as Germany," he said.

Oakland's Richard Lardner is a busy salesman who isn't home very much. He didn't have time to take care of his two 80-year-old parrots. Since he entrusted them to a parrot ranch, he's now burdened with their 5-foot by 3-foot wrought iron cage. Besides that, he has unwanted furniture, a weight set and a NordicTrack that have been gathering dust in his Grand Lake residence. The parrot cage has been a problem. "Connecting with the right buyer for a thing like that is difficult," Lardner said.

He has been intrigued watching Cummings catalog all this merchandise and is eager to follow the auction process as it begins online. Richmond's Vera Reddick said Cummings made life easier for her and her family after her mom died. "We needed to dispose of her furnishings. He advised us which things would sell and which we should trash. I was surprised at some of the things that sold, such as the living room sofa and love seat that went for \$500. He did everything. We just waited at home for the check," Reddick said.

When David Wolfgram and his wife bought a home in Alamo, they wanted to remodel the kitchen. The cabinets and the appliances were still usable but did not have the look they wanted. "The contractor wanted to throw them all out; and we instead put the entire kitchen on eBay and saved them from the landfill. Some bidders came and looked at them. John was very good in handling everything for us," Wolfgram said. They ended up selling their kitchen cabinets for \$4,500 to a young couple in Sacramento.

Cummings can be reached at <http://www.foundvalue.com/jca-auctions> or at (888) 257-5492.

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