

Top 10 Tips on Making Money at an Auto Swap Meet

By Jeff Zurschmeide

One of the Pacific Northwest's most prominent automotive journalists, Jeff's swap meet experience includes both emptying and filling his truck. He has authored [books on topics ranging from sports cars to welding](#).

Most car people have looked around their garage or workshop at some point and decided that they need to get rid of about 90 percent of the stuff they've collected. But several things stand in the way – the first and most obvious is “how to get rid of it?” It's tempting to think that you could catalog everything and make a mint selling it on eBay, but who has time to actually do that? The much easier solution is to take it all to a swap meet and sell it there. But that's where the other challenges come up – and here's a secret: all of those challenges are inside your head.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, the [Portland Swap Meet](#) the first week in April is a golden opportunity to get rid of stuff you're never going to use, and put a few (or very many) dollars into your pockets. To make the most of your swap meet booth, here are my top ten tips. You may not like all of them, but over 20 years as a swap meet buyer and seller, I've come to find they're true.

- 1) **Pack More Than You Really Want to Sell** – You really need to think like someone who's never seen all this stuff before when you evaluate what to take to the swap, and what to keep safely stashed away. The basic rules of cleaning-out apply: have you used this stuff in the last year? (OK, I'll allow two years, but not a day more.) Do you have more than one copy of an item? If you're not using it, sell it. If you have more than one item, keep the best one and sell the rest.
- 2) **Bring Food and Drinks** – Murphy's Law says that the perfect customer will show up at the exact time you've run off to get a hot dog. Everyone needs to get away from their booth, but by bringing snacks and a lunch, you can increase the chances that you're present for that buyer to find the item “they just have to have” in your booth.
- 3) **Bring a Friend** – You'll want to walk the meet yourself, so bring a friend both to share the time and to mind the store. One important point, though: You need to authorize or empower your friend to make deals while you're gone. And no grouching if, while you're out, something sells for less than you would hope -- because no buyer is willing to wait around while you're on walkabout, and any money made in your absence is a plus.
- 4) **Get a Good Spot** – At the time I wrote this, there still were a few indoor spaces available at the Portland meet, which is held indoors and outdoors. And you don't need to be on the end of an aisle or right by a door with an inside booth – particularly when a squall drives buyers inside. If you're

outside, a tent, EZ-up, or covered trailer are springtime swap meet essentials, as is a space heater.

- 5) **Bring Tables** – Buyers don't like to root through piles or boxes of stuff. Sure, some will take the trouble, but far more will just walk right by. And those hardy souls who do dig from the pile won't offer as much for the same part as when it's displayed nicely. Shelves are good, and EZ-Up tents also allow you to hang important items at eye level.
- 6) **Use Signs** – Let people know what they're looking at. If you have a bunch of stuff from a particular car model, write it out in big bold letters on a piece of cardboard or a white board. If you have more stuff at home, note that, too.
- 7) **Have Change Handy** – You can lose a sale by not having change. Go to the bank before you head to the meet and get a stack of \$1s and \$5s -- you'll come home from the meet with a pocket full of \$20s and \$50s, or better!
- 8) **Be Friendly** – Nothing turns a buyer off faster than a grouch. If you decline a buyer's offer, remember that they're car enthusiasts, just like you. By the way, everyone nearby – buyers as well as sellers – will notice how you interact with buyers. Will they want to do business with you? Also, buyers are more likely to come back for a second run at an item if their previous stop at your booth was enjoyable. You'll come home with more money in your pockets if keep a smile on your face.
- 9) **Price Things Appropriately** – This is where it gets tough. No one wants to leave money on the table. But you didn't drag all this stuff to the meet just to drag it all home again and repack it, right? Absolutely not! You brought it to the meet to move it down the road with another car enthusiast. Keep that in mind in setting initial prices, and holding to those prices if things aren't selling.
- 10) **But Don't be Afraid to Say "No"** – Keeping in mind that you really **do** want to sell this stuff, don't be shy about saying "no" to low-ball offers. If you believe you can sell it for more before the show ends, it's OK to say "No, thanks" to low bids. After all, the buyer may be testing you, and he might meet your price if you're determined. Or, he may return with a better offer. But a last word on turning down offers -- once the item is gone, are you really going to miss it?

I've always had a great time as a swap meet vendor, and I usually go home with an empty truck and bulging pockets. Clearing out the junk feels great and it opens my workshop to the next great project. Follow these easy guidelines and I'm guessing you'll have a great time, too.

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