We extend Lastovicka and Fernandez’ (2005) naturalistic study of garage sales to an on-line setting, and offer prescriptions for both buyers and sellers of meaningful possessions. It has been argued that it is in buyers’ best interests to appear uncommitted in their enthusiasm about products when negotiating with a seller. In contrast, our field research with on-line auction buyers suggests the opposite. In the case of a consumer disposing of a meaningful possession through selling — when a shared self is sensed between the buyer and the seller — our results show such disclosure is a benefit to the buyer.

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DISPOSING MEANINGFUL POSSESSIONS TO BUYERS WITH A SHARED SELF
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ABSTRACT
There are several bases for a shared self among seller-buyer dyads. The literature describes shared selves rooted in interpersonal networks like friendship networks or family networks. For example, Goss (1984) demonstrates that shared selves, with overlapping schemas, exist in close friendships. Whereas friendships or families are common-bond groups defined through an interdependent social network, we examine anonymous sellers and buyers who only have just met in the marketplace. If such strangers sense a shared self, then both have likely discovered common identities from common memberships in groups providing an identity (Prentice et al. 1994). Thus discovery of a common identity may begin through what an owner’s possession communicates about group membership. When a potential buyer meets a seller divesting of a possession communicating common-group membership, then a seller-buyer dyad may discover a shared self. A shared self (rooted in common identity) provides some assurance for the seller that accurate meaning is communicated from seller to buyer. Accurate communication depends upon a shared field of experience and knowledge between sender and receiver. Thus, to convey a possession’s meaning, the buyer must share a field of experience with the seller. Common experience and knowledge from a shared membership allows a seller to more precisely transfer a possession’s meaning to a buyer. In many instances, sellers realise that only a few buyers will really understand a meaningful possession.

METHOD
A month’s listings of on-line, electric-guitar auctions for used instruments were examined to identify 50 original owners and 50 professional dealers selling vintage (pre-1975) electric guitars. Vintage guitars were appropriate for this research as those who play or collect these musical instruments often attach special meanings to their guitars. For example, buyers of electric guitars made in the 1950s and 1960s have been characterised as aging male baby boomers indulging in nostalgia or trying to re-capture lost youth with an old guitar (Blackburn 1992). And, when losing a special guitar, selling to an appreciative buyer can help make the separation easier. In Old Guitar Mania, clinical psychologist Bill Blackburn described the seller of a rare 1955 custom-color Fender Stratocaster as follows (1992, p 75):

Howard’s mother … transferred … devotion [from her deceased son] to …[her son’s] black [Fender] Strat[ocaster guitar] and protected it from harm or alteration over the years. She sold the guitar to its present owner comforted by the fact that the black Strat[ocaster] and the memory of her son would continue to be treasured.

Conversely, a seller attached to a guitar may not sell to an unappreciative buyer. This is reflected in journalist Tom Wheeler’s (1985, p 102) observation:

Sellers of vintage guitars vary as to their personal attachments to their instruments. Some [sellers] may well refuse to sell a guitar – even at an inflated price – to someone … who has acquired a reputation for abusing instruments or for not fully appreciating … [a guitar].

If a guitar’s auction listing made clear reference to original ownership, and made no reference to being an instrument dealer, then the seller was classified as a private seller. In contrast, when a listing was by a professional dealer, or made no original-owner claim, or the posting was one of several concurrent guitar auction postings, then the seller was classified as a professional dealer. E-mails were then sent to the 100 auction sellers from a potential buyer. The e-mail sent to all sellers expressed both an emotional connection to, and an appreciation for, the guitar by describing the experience of playing such a guitar decades ago when young. The e-mail also requested a sales concession in the event of winning the auction by requesting a time extension of 30 days to pay for the guitar. Unless stated otherwise, sellers required payment within 7 or 10 days and auction rules required payment within 21 days unless other arrangements have been made between the buyer and seller.

An e-mail sent to a dealer selling a solid bodied National “map” guitar read as follows:

RE: 1961 “Map Shaped” National Guitar

Back in the 60s I played a National guitar just like you are now selling on-line. I played that guitar when I had my first serious girlfriend. Of course, I then traded up and bought what I thought was a “better” guitar, but I still think about that National as the one that I should have never let slip away from me. I’d really like to hold and play that National again.

In any case, I am writing because I am determined to have the winning bid for the guitar. But there is a problem. I am not able to pay you within the short time you require in your auction posting. If I do have the winning bid, would you please give me 30 days to pay you in full? I could overnight mail you a certified check for $50 within two days of winning the auction and then would pay in full within 30 days. I will only bid if you could accept full payment in 30 days

I would really treasure the guitar. I’d play it and give it a good home. I would really appreciate it if you could help me out on this. I look forward to hearing from you.

To private-party sellers, the e-mail was expected to evoke a shared and common experience of playing such a guitar decades ago. Although the e-mail was designed to create a sense of shared self among private-party sellers, it was expected that little sense of shared self would be created among professional sellers. Dealers likely only value vintage instruments’ public meanings—the instrument’s condition and economic value—and were less concerned with emotionally charged private meanings. On-line sellers’ replies were obtained by email. These replies were coded to reflect if they accepted or rejected the proposed request for a concession. Replies also often
contained comments about the meaning of the guitar to the seller, which were also noted. All sellers were re-contacted by email (just after receiving a response or, if having received no response, then no-later-than three days before the auction’s close) and were told the bidder’s financial circumstances had changed for the worse and that the potential buyer would not be bidding at all.

**FINDINGS**

Replies were obtained from 74 sellers, with 41 replies from professional dealers and 33 from private parties. Among those responding, 76 percent of private parties disposing of an item owned for 25 years or more were willing to wait 30 days to be paid from a buyer expressing a likely common identity; in contrast, only 46 percent of professional dealers were willing to grant such a concession to such a buyer. When we interpret non-response as a seller’s unwillingness to grant a time concession, then those selling their own personal possessions were still found more likely (50 percent) to grant the preferential treatment than were dealers (38 percent).

When a still meaningful possession is being sold, the transaction with the buyer has meaning to the seller well beyond the reclaimed closet space or money earned from the sale. Finding a good home for a meaningful possession (Herrmann 1997) with a shared self can be as important—or more important—than any economic benefit obtained from selling the item. Placing the possession in the right set of hands offers some assurance that the good works and private meanings of the possession will be perpetuated. And when sellers sensed a shared self, they were found willing to provide favorable terms to a select buyer.

Private parties’ concessions often reflected on their history with their instrument. This is illustrated in a reply about a semi-hollow bodied Gretsch guitar:

**RE: RE: 1964 Gretsch Chet Atkins - Tennessean C**

Thank you for writing. I am glad to hear that you can give my guitar a good home. I am hesitant to sell because of the sentimental value the guitar has to me. But I have never really learned how to play it like it like George Harrison did. For the last 25 years, my Gretsch Tennessean has just sat untouched in its hardshell case in the hall closet gathering dust. And so, yes, I will be willing to wait 30 days for payment. I would however have to receive your $50 promptly. As you know the value of this guitar, the ending auction fee due right after the auction will be more than $50.

I have no problem waiting 30 days. I will monitor the auction. Good Luck! I hope you win. I would like to see this go to someone who could appreciate it.

In this reply, the owner conveys something of his private life story with his Tennessean guitar. Similar to that reported by Lastovika and Fernandez (2004), this research also shows sellers conveying the private meanings of possessions to a desirable buyer.

In contrast, the majority of dealer replies were like this e-mail concerning a now-classic electric guitar (a Danelectro solidbody with a built-in sound amplifier in the case) once sold by Sears:

**RE: RE: 1965 Silvertone / Danelectro with Amp in case D**

Thank you for your offer, but I really need the cash and could not wait that long. Sorry.

Consistent with the likely priorities of a business-to-consumer sale, this vintage “Dane-O” guitar has no obvious private or special meaning to this dealer. To this seller, the “Dane-O” only has economic value (Greenwood and Hembree 2001).

**IMPLICATIONS**

We speculate that our research has direct implications for consumers (Bazerman 2000). These implications are primarily for consumers acting as sellers of their own possessions. In addition, we offer limited advice to consumers buying used items directly from owners. These suggestions are testimony to the practical worth of consumer disposition research. As our investigation has shown, and as this advice emphasises, disposition is not always a mundane and unemotional act. For consumers selling their own personal possessions, we suspect that some sellers do not realise the distress caused by selling personal possessions until it is too late. Emotional ties to meaningful possessions may never erode, even after physical separation from such items. Most popular-press advice to would-be sellers of personal possessions focuses on how to maximise cash-on-the-barrelhead sales (e.g., Pedigo 1993). There is little recognition of another currency, namely: the satisfaction in knowing that possessions have gone on to good homes. Accordingly, we believe that sellers should also be counselled that the satisfaction of placing special items with appreciative buyers might be as valuable, or more valuable, than any cash earned. Given all of this, then, sellers should be encouraged to get to know their buyers and to consider treating appreciative buyers generously.

Consumers selling their own possessions need to realise that a trade-off exists between cash earnings and satisfaction from the knowledge that the new owner will care for and appreciate a special item. We believe sellers financial gains can be compromised when gaining utility derived by selling (at favorable terms) to appreciative buyers. Thus, if cash is the primary goal, then a consumer selling a large-ticket special possession (e.g., a house) may be best served with a third-party professional sales agent (e.g., a realtor). To maximise financial return, then as consumers selling their own large-ticket possessions negotiate with buyers, these sellers are advised to sever emotional ties with the item being sold. Otherwise, sellers risk being at a financial disadvantage.

For buyers, we suggest that it is often to their advantage to express genuine interest and excitement about special-to-the-owner possessions being offered for sale directly by the owner. As we show, those selling their own special possessions are likely to respond with more attractive terms for buyers exhibiting a shared sense of self. This is counter to Cialdini’s (1984) recommendation that it is in the best interest of the buyer to remain uncommitted and, at best, neutral in their enthusiasm about products when negotiating with a seller. So long as the seller’s goal is cash, we believe Cialdini’s advice is sound. However, in
the case of an owner selling a special possession, knowing that the possession will continue to be appreciated may be more important than any cash received. In the latter case, the buyer’s expression of enthusiasm for a meaningful possession is to the buyer’s economic advantage. Thus buyers are also advised to get to know the buyer’s attachment to an item before following this suggestion.

For both buyers and sellers, we point out that used possessions being sold have been transformed from interchangeable commodities into unique items because of the unique histories each owner has shared with each possession. Buyers who recognise and seek out these unique meanings will likely be seen as more desirable buyers and may reap favorable terms of sale. Sellers who enhance appreciativeness on the part of the buyer by relating a private meaning, may make disposition less painful for themselves.

Although the discussion in this section is clearly speculative, this advice has basis in the interpretations grounded in our data. We hope these modest speculations form the basis for future research aimed at assisting those consumers acting as sellers of their own possessions, and those consumers buying used items directly from their former owners.

REFERENCES