

# Be a Successful Stellafane Swap Table Shopper

## Simple Rules and Over 100 Tips to Help You Find Great Deals at Stellafane And to Help Avoid Making Bad Purchases

By Ronald Lewis

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### PREFACE

I personally believe that the Stellafane Swap Tables are the best thing since triple coupons for the “cost effective spender.” Others might call me a tightwad, a penny pincher, a cheapskate, frugal. ... but I just think I’m making smart choices with the money I have to spend and have a lot of fun doing it! I want to show you how important it is to get all your ducks in a row and get ready to go out Saturday to find all sorts of astronomical goodies, so here are many of my tips for making “Stellafaning” fun and worthwhile. Happy Findings, My Astronomical Friends!

### PLAN AHEAD – THE PREPARATION

**Budget a certain amount per month for the Swap Tables.** I keep an empty container in my hobby room where all my change goes. That is a great way to save some Swap Table money. It seems August comes around earlier than it’s supposed to, so start saving money for next year’s Swap Tables the day after each Stellafane.

**Do your homework.** Do research in astro catalogs, the internet and on ebay for what you need in your inventory of astronomical gear, so you can be on the lookout at the Swap Tables. In order to negotiate a fair price, you need to know what the piece is worth. Let’s say you find a set of binos that are priced at \$150 and you know they’re only worth \$100. If you offer \$20, you will probably insult the seller and risk any other deal with them. Do your homework before you head out the door.

A typical Swap Table day will last from 5:05am until 11am. Don’t believe any literature that claims that the Swap Tables begin at 7:00 a.m. and runs until noon; they start insanely early and last only until everyone is exhausted. If you arrive when the Swap Table sales start, carry a flashlight. For the first 10 minutes or so, it’s dark! Some sellers probably won’t be ready for you, but if you leave to let them set up, you likely could miss out on some of the really good stuff. Remember, you are competing with hundreds of other people for the same items. Remember the saying - the early bird gets the worm, or in this case, the \$20 OIII filter!

The early bird catches the worm, and you should always try to head out as soon as you can. If you hate getting up early or if you have a hard time getting up early, bring an alarm clock, and put it near your head. Not bringing a pillow also works well.

**Wear comfortable clothing.** Don’t wear sandals or flip-flops. Your feet will get wet if it’s been raining (a good bet), or if it’s been a dewy morning. Wear comfortable shoes or sneakers.

**Use a fanny-pack.** If you’re a real Swap Table Power Shopper, leave the purse or “man purse” at home. By using a fanny pack, you can shop, jump on items, and leave your hands free for inspecting (for chips and cracks, too) and carrying your merchandise. This also frees you from worrying about the whereabouts of that disappearing purse. Yes, I know it makes you look like a fashion disaster. Believe me, that’s probably nothing new. It saves time when I find a new treasure. One bad thing about wearing a fanny pack, though, is that other buyers may confuse you with the person holding the sale and will come up to you offering money. (Oh, did I say that was a bad thing???)

**Other necessities** for the hard-core Stellafaner:: hat/sunglasses to keep sun out of eyes, suntan lotion (if you burn easily), a small cooler with beverages in the car.

**Bring Handy Tools:** Carry a small screwdriver in case you need to check batteries; extra batteries, tape measure, rope to tie things to your car, extra bags to carry things with, newspapers to wrap breakables or to keep them out of the sun. If you are looking for something in a particular size (e.g., a lens cover), it’s good to carry a small tape measure. It’s also handy to carry a small multi-purpose tool (e.g., a Leatherman), in case you need to cut a rope to tie something to your car, use a small screwdriver to check the battery compartment of something, etc. And some people may want to keep a supply of batteries (in various sizes) in their car on in their tote or fanny-pack so they can test battery-operated items if they need to.

**Go to the Swap Tables with a Wish List.** This gives you a guideline to go by, and won’t let you forget what you “really need.” Keep a list of things you are looking for that you \*know\* you need or want. A list will keep you focused on what you’re looking for. Often I’m looking for certain eyepieces, filters, and so forth, which I know I’ll probably find. You’d be amazed at how many different things show up at the Swap Tables. A couple of years ago, I found every item on my extensive Wish List, something I thought beforehand was impossible to do.

In addition to items on your list, look for things that will make nice gifts for your special astronomy friends, whether for their birthday or for Christmas. Keep a list of those people you need to buy gifts for and any particular “holes” in their equipment inventory. Keep a list of those people you need to buy gifts for and any particular interests they might have. Believe it or not, the Swap Tables are great for finding \*specialty\* gifts that might have nothing to do with astronomy, but might fit a particular person’s hobby or tastes. I have also found books in like-new condition for gifts. For instance, I gave one of my astro-buddies a new, in the box, portable roll-up table for Christmas; I paid only \$5 for it!

Watch for great deals! Some items that are selling at a rock bottom price could be sold by you for a higher profit. Watching for non-astronomy things: books, antiques, tools, and items you may not want, but could gain a higher profit on your table can be great deals, earning you more money, for possible new items in your collection of astro-gadgets.

**Selling at the Swap Tables.** If you also want to sell items, perhaps even those items that you just bought the same day, it's a fine line when to stop being a buyer and when to begin being a seller. Sometimes I set up quickly next to someone who I know or looks trustworthy, quickly put out my wares and stick price labels on them, then ask the person next to me if they can watch my table for a few minutes. This way, I can "float" between being a seller and having an eye open for more bargains.

**Write down needed sizes and measurements.** Carry a tape measure. Write down what you already have so you don't buy duplicates.

**Carry a collapsible tote (or 2).** You don't want to be carrying so many awkward items that you can no longer pick up and examine new items that you're interested in. Home Depot has nice 99 cent totes. Keep a cardboard box or tote bag in your car to hold your purchases. It will keep them from rolling around as you head home from Stellafane. It also will make it handy to carry your purchases into your house. Before I did this, sometimes I would drop breakables because I was trying to carry too much stuff into the house at once. Keep some old newspapers in your car too, to wrap breakable things in (if the seller didn't think ahead and have any handy). It's also a good idea to have some "wet naps", diaper wipes, or a bottle of hand sanitizer gel to clean your hands in case you pick something up yucky at the Swap Tables, or just to clean your hands at the end of the sales. I'll often stick a plastic grocery store bag in my pocket, too. So when I see a bunch of goodies I want, I don't have to scrounge around (and waste time) asking for a bag or search for an unused box to put everything in or try to carry everything in my arms.

**Leave the kids at home:** You'll have a much more successful day at the Swap Tables without the kids, I promise.

**Get to know the layout of the Swap Table area.** New sellers can only come into the area from two different directions. Always keep the corner of your eyes on these areas so that you can be one of the first to see what a new seller is bringing to the area.

**Get to know your prices,** just as you do with your regular shopping. Some people are clueless about what to charge because they haven't been to the Swap Tables, let alone garage sales, or even had a garage sale. You can find wonderful deals, or you can find things way overpriced. If I stumble on a table where the items are really high, I usually walk away pretty quickly, unless they have something I'm extremely interested in purchasing. If you're looking for eyepieces, study up. Have a list of what you already have, and perhaps what you need at the ready.

**Know what you're looking for.** Resist the urge to buy things you don't need no matter how cheap the items are. It's better to have a mental list of what you're trying to find or you might buy just so much "clutter." To avoid filling up your own house with more "stuff" and items you won't use, always ask yourself if you will be able to use the item you are purchasing, give it as a gift, or resell it for a profit. In my earlier days, I accumulated too much stuff just because I couldn't resist great bargains. I have become much more picky with all my purchases, including my Swap Table finds.

I always look for items I can resell to make a profit. I used to resell my astro things at the Swap Tables, but now we also have Craigslist through which to freely sell items. You too can make some extra money by doing this.

**Bring Small Bills and Coins:** There's nothing worse than haggling with someone, say for an eyepiece, down from \$10 to \$5, then looking a little ridiculous when you hand them a \$20 bill! Conversely, you could miss out on a great deal or be forced to overpay if they don't have change and neither do you. Sellers aren't going to give you all their change, either. Of course it is the seller's responsibility to have change, but wiping out the seller's entire change supply with a \$20 for a \$1 sale is inconsiderate. Arm yourself with plenty of change and you'll pay exactly what you want to pay. You'll need small bills, lots of them. Take a variety of cash. A good bankroll is \$500: 200 ones, 40 fives, 5 tens, 2 twenties, and a roll of quarters (\$10). You do not want to lose a deal because the seller cannot make change, and you don't want to be slowed down while the seller fumbles for change. It prevents those "what do we do now?" moments that can slow you down. Don't waste a seller's time by asking them to hold an item until you come back to pay, which will be never since the banks aren't open until later in the day and the ATM in downtown Springfield isn't working that day! You want to pay and leave for the next table. Also, a checkbook can come in handy if you find a rather large score, and a receptive seller who will let you write a personal check. Checks are usually a hassle for sellers and most prefer cash. Remember, the Swap Table sellers are not professional dealers, or at least they're not supposed to be; they're just like you or me.

**Take a notebook and pen or pencil.** Don't leave your notebook in the car; carry it with you. I rarely see people doing this. Your notebook has several purposes. Swap Tables

Your notebook is for taking notes, obviously. When you see something at the Swap Tables and think it might be worth buying, but aren't sure, write a simple description in your book. Later, you can do some research and find out if you passed on something good. If you also get the seller's telephone number, you can call them if you discover it was something good, and see if they still have it. Now all you need is a bit of knowledge about what to buy. Using your notebook, and researching things you passed up on eBay afterwards, will help you spot items in the future

Take notes when a seller refuses your offer. Many sellers will say, "If I don't sell it by 10:00, come back and I'll take your offer." You know for sure you're going to get a good deal if this takes place!

If you think to ask for additional items on your wish list, the seller may say they have one but cannot get it out of their car now or have

it at home. Also, other shoppers might have what you want. Get telephone numbers. This is important. Getting a telephone number allows you to follow up. Handing out a business card gives you no ability to follow up. Cards are for networking, not buying.

When you are asking the seller for items, there will be other shoppers around. Some will be asking for items too. If you overhear someone asking for something interesting, make a note and research this later.

**Have a budget of what you're going to spend and what you want to buy.** You can go overboard by overspending. Allow yourself a certain amount of money to spend and stick to it. Overspending takes away the sense of pride you get by saving money at the Swap Tables. If you only allow yourself to spend a certain amount of money, you will be more likely to make sure you get the best deals on the items you decide to buy.

Watch your spending, a good day at the Swap Tables will satisfy many of your interests and needs, and it is easy to "nickel and dime" or spend a little here, a little there; remember, it all adds up.

**Go with an astronomy friend.** You may think this would be a problem, that you'd be competing against each other on some deals. I've found it to be just the opposite, that we watch for each other's wishes, help each other to bargain, etc. It really helps to have another set of eyes watching for things. Two is better than one. Just make sure the friend understands not to steal your deals—it's best to be working together, so all the good finds contribute to the greater good.

**Take provisions.** It's best to be prepared for the inevitable hunger. Also, the fact that you're shopping the Swap Tables sales likely indicates a margin of frugality in your life, and we all know it's cheaper to eat from home rather than from Taco Bell (there's a time and a place for Taco Bell, and being at the Swap Tables is not it). You don't want to be sidelined by hunger or thirst. Since you will be out shopping for several hours, to keep hunger and thirst at bay, take along a small cooler with easy-to-handle snacks and drinks. Of course you could stop by the snack shop for food when your morning stomach starts to growl, but doing so would take time away from bargain-hunting. Having your coffee or diet Coke in the morning provides a sure start to the morning!

**Ask yourself some final questions.** Buying astronomy-related things at the Swap Tables can be addictive, so make sure you have the space for your purchases! And if you really get pulled in, follow the simple rules. Do you really want it? Is it worth the price? Is it a good deal? Is everything with it? Does passing up on the "deal" still feel good to you? And last but not least, do you have the space for that big new reflector in your living room? Or for that matter, the need? What will your spouse say?

## **IT'S THE BIG DAY – THE SWAP TABLES LIE BEFORE YOU**

**Timing Is Everything.** Whether you are the first to arrive or the last to leave, timing at the Swap Tables is crucial. Although the selection is better when the event opens, bargaining with a seller in the first few minutes probably won't get you much of a deal since there are many hours left to make that perfect sale for themselves.

**Don't be afraid to butt in front of people.** You want to be the first to see something. Remember, others don't mind doing the same to you! Expect to run across a few people who are rude.

**Polish your negotiation skills!** This is the best place in the world to practice negotiating, a great learning opportunity. There are different ways to negotiate, and sometimes you can get a "feel" for how flexible the people are with their prices by listening to others making offers. I use one of two approaches. I will either say, "Are your prices negotiable? If so, what is the lowest you would go on this item?" The other approach I will use is to simply offer a certain amount based on what I am willing to pay for an item. This is particularly true of items I find often, or something I could walk away from and not be sorry if I didn't get it. Always show respect to the seller when negotiating. You will get much further by being friendly and not trying to use an intimidating lowball approach. Don't be afraid to haggle. Some people might get offended, but you have nothing to lose by asking, "Will you be willing to take \$XX for this?" Worst-case scenario, they say no. Best-case scenario, you get your price.

**Don't bring the Mercedes.** If you plan to do a lot of bargaining, you might want to leave the Rolex at home and wear your Timex instead. No one wants to haggle over 25 cents with Bill Gates or Lady Astor. Don't indicate any wealth; leave your flashy jewelry home, because if the seller sees it, there goes any leverage for negotiating. Don't flash your wad, either; same result.

You want to look like a clean, polite, acceptable, middle class person. Fancy clothes and expensive jewelry will hurt you when you negotiate. Try not to flash that fancy camera, either. Dirty clothes will also close doors. If you look like a bum, you will be treated like a bum.

Dress down; you'll have a better chance of negotiating prices if you look like you can't afford to spend a lot.

**Wear comfortable clothing and shoes.** You're going to be standing for 4 or 5 hours, with no place to sit down. Your Swap Table shopping experience will be more pleasant if you and any family members who go with you are comfortable. Make sure everyone wears weather-appropriate clothing and comfortable shoes. Sunscreen and hats are also helpful, as there is a good chance you will be out in the sun for a long period of time. Don't forget to make sure everyone hits the outhouse on the way to the Swap Tables!

**Don't judge a book by its cover.** You can't judge a book by its cover, and you can't judge a sale by your first impressions, either. You never know what kinds of bargains lurk on the seller's table, or in the box where they have stuff they haven't had time to put out! Sometimes you find the best deals at the sales that are the least organized because the sellers just want to get rid of their stuff.

**Don't be in too much of a hurry.** If you find yourself at a truly great table (great prices and has a lot of things you want/need), don't

be in too much of a hurry to run off to the next table. Make sure you have thoroughly shopped it before leaving. Many times you may only find one or two really "good" tables at the same time and a lot of crappy ones, so you will have wished you had spent more time at the "good" tables rather than rushing off quickly. If a certain item catches your eye from afar, immediately go to it. Examine it and determine if it is something you want. If not, browse through the rest of the items on the table in an orderly fashion, examining (or scanning) all items carefully, but at the same time, quickly. Inspect anything that strikes your interest, look it over and check the price. Go orderly through all the table's merchandise in this way.

**Don't be afraid of NOT buying something at the Swap Tables.** I know some people who feel a weird obligation to buy something at nearly every table whether they need it or not. It's easy to just say, "Sorry I don't see anything I need - good luck with your sale, you have a great day," and then you're off to the next table. Otherwise you'll end up with so much stuff you'll have to have your own sale right there that day!

**Smoke gets in your eyes.** If you are sensitive to cigarette smoke or smell, take note. to see if the seller has a pack of cigarettes and lighter nearby (i.e., on their table). If so, there's a good chance that whatever you buy may smell like cigarette smoke.

**Attention everyone!** Every once in a while you may know the person selling or just happen to have a nice conversation with a seller. In those cases where you are buying something, make sure you have the seller's full attention when you are paying them. This has happened to me - you pay for something, stick around a bit to chat, and then when you are walking away the seller says "Oh, did you pay me for that?" Argghgh! Likewise, I've found myself walking around with an item in my hands that I forgot to pay for, then rushed back and had to explain myself!

Look over items carefully. Make sure you are buying what you think you are buying. Huh? Sometimes when people upgrade their stuff, they often put the old item in the new box. Example: A friend told me he saw a box for a new fancy printer/scanner/fax machine at a yard sale. He bought it thinking that's what was inside. Nope. He got it home and inside the box found the seller's OLD printer in the NEW box! So even if something looks new, you still better check it out. I can't tell you how many times I've seen people who walk up and buy something without looking inside a box; they just scoop it up, pay for it, and leave.

**Enjoy yourself!** There's nothing like the high of a good bargain hunt. Never get into a skirmish over an item – you'll never feel good about the item, even if it ends up in your possession.

## **THE DANCE OF NEGOTIATION/HAGGLING**

**Be cautious about what you buy.** You don't want to make a big mistake; some "bargains" are nothing more than a coffee table coaster if they're all scratched up. Since many Swap Table items are in "well-loved" condition, carefully inspect the merchandise prior to purchase. Check for "stains, cracks, rips, marks and tears." There are no returns in the Swap Table world! If the piece you are eyeing has a chip, ding or is missing hardware, nicely point it out to the seller. The seller may offer a bargain you can't refuse! Although this is often a useful technique, some sellers may take offense to you pointing out flaws in their items. Use at your own discretion.

**Check for Parts:** Always look inside boxes and check for any missing parts; if something has a lot of pieces and has been opened, take the time to make sure all the pieces are there. On a hot day or at the end of a long day, this can seem tiresome, but it will be worth it when you get home and have something you can use instead of another piece of junk you'll have to try and sell at your next yard sale.

**Plug n Play:** Always check electrical items, if possible. It is always a good idea to keep some batteries in your fanny-pack or car, so that you can test things when you find them. When buying something that is battery-operated, open the battery compartment to make sure there aren't some old batteries in it that are corroded!!! I learned the hard way. Test it...don't just ask if it works, then trust the person when they say it does. You will be kickin' yourself if you get home and find out it doesn't work. Also, even if the battery compartment is clean and empty, there's still a chance the item could be broken since you can't test it, unless the seller happens to have batteries on hand or if you carry some with you (take batteries in different sizes to test battery-operated items).

**Grab What You Like:** Even if you're not 100% sure you're going to buy an item, if you like it, pick it up and carry it around with you so that someone else doesn't grab it while you're browsing. If it's heavy or awkward, ask the seller to hold onto it while you shop for other things at their table. While I will never take something from someone else, and you shouldn't either, others' will. As soon as you see something you want, grab it, and do not let go until you are paying the seller. Get your hands on any item you think you might want to purchase. This allows you time to look it over, perhaps even have someone "accidentally" tell you what a bargain it is, or some details about the item of which you weren't aware. Do not put it down unless you are sure you do not want it. Someone else may be just waiting for you to put it down and "think" about it (while they pick it up and buy it). You don't want to be kicking yourself the rest of the day.

God forbid you're with small kids, but if you are, try to watch what they're picking up, then hold their purchases too. It's difficult I know, because we're all kids at the Swaps, believe me! Fortunately, you won't see many kids at the Swap Tables that early.

**Be Courteous, Respectful and Fair.** It doesn't hurt to be visibly nice when walking up to a sale. You never know if they'll have anything good, and people are more willing to cut you a deal if they like you. Form a relationship/rapport with the seller. Have a good sense of humor; people want to sell to people that they like. Always be respectful, polite and fair. If you are rude or obnoxious to a seller and offer a ridiculously low price, chances are you won't get the piece. Offering a ridiculous price is insulting to sellers. Some items may even have sentimental value and negotiating is not an option. Being kind and courteous is not only the right thing to do, it could also save you money. Negotiating is the name of the game. Most sellers are willing to deal as long as you are fair with them.

Asking the seller to take \$2 for an item marked \$20 is pushing your luck. The seller may be more than willing to sell the item for \$15 or even \$10, depending how late in the day it is. Don't be ridiculous when you're negotiating. Just name a fair price. Buyers want to save money and sellers want to make money. Meet somewhere in the middle and you'll both be pleased. If it is something you have been searching for and it's a hard-to-find piece, bargaining over a few bucks may not be your best choice. If it is a fair price, consider it; if it is too high, bargain.

Don't be afraid to haggle a price down if you feel it is too high. The worst that the seller can say is no. I think it's in very bad taste to haggle a price down from \$1.00 to 50 cents only to whip out a \$20 bill to pay for it. Believe me, it happens. If I think the price is fair or a steal, I don't bother haggling. Nothing is more annoying to me (when I'm selling) than to have a customer who wants to haggle on every little item.

It also helps to ask in your sweetest, most non-argumentative voice. Being too aggressive makes people feel defensive, as if you think there's no way their stuff is POSSIBLY worth what they're asking. You never want to make sellers feel this way, or else you're doomed. Be sweet.

**Pardon me.** Ask any questions about items (i.e., "What is this? How old is it? Is there anything wrong with it? Is it missing any parts? Does it work?"). Some things even the sellers may not know anything about, but try to get an idea of what you are buying. Nothing is worse than shelling out \$30.00, then later finding out it's missing required parts, or plain just doesn't work.

**Practice Makes Perfect.** Many people feel uncomfortable haggling or bargaining. It takes time and experience to feel comfortable negotiating. If you're serious about saving your hard-earned cash, practice your haggling technique before you head to the show. To get the best deal you can -- practice!

**Listen to other buyers.** Polish your negotiation skills! This is the best place in the world to practice negotiating. There are different ways to negotiate, and sometimes you can get a \*feel\* for how flexible the people are with their prices by listening to others making offers.

**Get Them to Name Their Price:** Don't fall into the trap of answering the question "what would you like to pay for this?" If they didn't label their possessions, ask them what they want for it, and then bargain down. Otherwise, you could end up risking offering far more than even they expected to get. Remember: first to name a price loses. Ask the seller "How much?" first. Same thing, but reverse when you are selling something; try to get the customer to name their price for an item - if it's too low, you can refuse - and if they name a really high price, you lucked out.

**Negotiate.** When you shop at the Swap Tables, don't be afraid to negotiate prices. People are selling to get rid of stuff. Many times they would be willing to take a lesser price than risk it being left over and not having made anything on the items. After all...your mission is to get the best deals you can.

Some people feel comfortable with negotiating the price, others don't. Personally, I am fairly comfortable with it for used items, and I've gotten some nice deals that way. On the other hand, if you don't feel comfortable with the idea of negotiating, don't worry about it; view any price as a "take it or leave it" price. If you do decide to haggle, I have a couple of rules of thumb. One is to be certain in your own mind how much you're willing to pay. If the seller won't come down to that level, pass on the deal. Another is to respect the seller; I'll bargain if I need to in order to get something for a price I consider fair, but not if it's a fantastic deal to begin with.

Discuss the item in a neutral way. Too positive = too eager. Too negative = seller dislikes you. Don't be too eager. If a seller knows you want it, they'll ask (and get) a higher price.

I use one of two main approaches. I will either say, "Are your prices negotiable? If so, what is the lowest you would go on this item?" The other approach I will use is to simply offer a certain amount based on what I am willing to pay for an item. If I have a lot of items at one table, I will figure in my head what it would be at their price and then will ask them if they would take so much (less) for it all. All you have to do is ask; all they can do is say no and most of the time you will be very happily surprised.

**Bargain, Don't Badger:** Sellers EXPECT buyers to haggle over their prices. So definitely ask if they'll take less than what they're asking. But try not to get belligerent if they don't want to move on their price. Remember, at the end of the day, they're still stuck with the item they wanted to get rid of, and you've moved onto another table.

**Haggle Now, Buy Later.** Always haggle, and always give an offer (the worst they can say is "no"). It can be exciting to haggle for good deals. If you haggle with a seller and they won't come down to the price you'd like to pay, leave your card with your cell phone number behind and tell them that if the item doesn't sell, you'll be willing to buy it later. This is an example of why it's a good idea to be friendly throughout the haggling process. If they don't like you, they won't call you to buy it, no matter how much they want to get rid of the item.

So many people are afraid to haggle because it's such an awful word—it sounds very hag-ish. But I tell you this: people who haggle are not hags. They are brilliant. Even if you only ask for a dollar less than the asking price, you can almost always get a better deal. Why not get more for your money? If you are the shy type who is afraid to negotiate, remember this: you are doing these people a favor by taking their things off their hands. The worst they can do is say no, in which case you either decide how badly you want the item—if you want it so bad your teeth hurt, offer more. If you could walk away and never give it another thought, do that.

Don't be afraid to make an offer. A lot of sellers price things so they can haggle. Try to group things. I like to buy full boxes or bags of items, if that's possible.

**Don't haggle if the price is right.** I once walked up to a garage sale with a fantastic collection of stamps. The stamps were all war stamps, and older, sheets and sheets of them, boxes upon boxes. There was another gentleman there trying to talk the seller down. The seller said, "If I can't get a hundred dollars for them, I'll keep them and use the stamps." The haggler stepped back from the items and turned away. At that point I picked up the boxes and handed the seller a crisp hundred and said thanks. There was over \$2,000 worth of stamps there, at FACE value, let alone at a collector's value!

Read the last sales tip again. There is a second lesson there. Sure the haggler was greedy or maybe he didn't have the money, which I doubt, but I didn't interrupt or step in until the haggler stepped back. This is important. It's about manners and ethics. There is no faster way to get a bad reputation than taking things away from others.

**Counter-offering.** Once you hear the seller's proposal, never counter it immediately. It shows respect that you really heard them. Then, when you do respond, give your reasons first and then make your counter-offer. The seller is forced to hear your reasons first and it makes your counter-offer more reasonable. Once you get a price from the seller, counter-offer at a price more acceptable to you. You may go back and forth a couple of times before you reach a middle ground. You also may have to start putting items back in order to get the seller to meet your price; the seller is likely to want to get rid of their items and doesn't want to take them back.

**Cash in Face Technique (CIF) - Show them the cash.** This is a ploy that works on occasion, so I'll mention it. If you're bursting to buy, offer a low price and add "I'll pay you cash right now." To make the deal extra sweet, actually show the seller the money and have the cash in your hand. The trouble on most occasions with this procedure is that everyone at the Swap Tables pays with cash! If you dare to use this method (and some people do find it an effective money-saving technique to use at the time of purchase), when you mentally know what you want to pay for an item, get that amount of money in your hand. When you go to pay for the item, physically hold out the money and say "Would you take \$XX for this?" People will sometimes accept this offer (even if it is lower than they were originally asking). The thought is that when people actually see the money, they instinctively want to grab it. If this works for you, then you have just found some truth to the effective method of "lowballing" the seller.

**Multiple purchases.** Ask for a discount price when you buy several items. Multiple item purchases tend to yield bigger discounts. Shop around, and once you have the items you want to purchase together, ask how much for the group. This way you may not have to negotiate on all of the individual items you are interested in. So, combine items for better pricing. For instance, if the seller won't budge on an item you want, group it with another item and say something like "will you take \$10 for both?" There are two kinds of sales - the ones where people want to make money and the ones where people want to get rid of stuff. The object is to find the ones where people want to get rid of stuff.

Do not be discouraged or upset if they are stubborn with the price (you were intending to buy it in the first place weren't you?). If you don't like it, simply put it back. Sometimes then they may agree to a price.

## **OTHER THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHILE SHOPPING**

**Confucius Say.** The old saying, "Go early for the best selection, and go late for the best prices" has little bearing at the Swap Tables. There is nothing at the Swap Tables that will end up at Goodwill when the sales are over, so don't expect to get free stuff at the "closing bell," so that the sellers don't have to pack it up. Don't get me wrong, I have actually seen items left behind for the taking, but they weren't of much value. Think of this saying in moderation: if a seller hasn't sold an item in a couple of hours, they will likely lower the price themselves, without having to be asked. By the end of the day, the merchandise has been picked over and the pickings are slim.

**Bring your cell phone with you.** This would allow a seller to contact you immediately following the Swap Tables if you had left your number with them about an item you were interested in that didn't sell. There is cell coverage at Stellafane, but barely. If you were "that interested" in an item, you might also want to tell the seller where you're camped ("Up on the hill with other members of the Vermont Astronomical Society").

**Bringing a Smart Phone is indeed Smart!** A smart phone allows you to check the going price for say, that LX200 that a seller has brought to the Swaps. Backed with a little "quick knowledge," you can return to the Swaps with an educated offer.

**Move rapidly from table to table.** The more tables you visit, the greater your chances of finding something interesting. Don't waste time on worthless sales. As soon as you learn there is no reason to stay, head for the next table.

**Always ask for additional items** if it appears that a particular seller may "almost have" what you're looking for. Multiple times, I've seen people do this, only to see the seller say "just a minute," and bring the item out from a box, or say they have the item in their car or home. Don't be afraid to ask for something you might be looking for but don't see. Also, someone in the crowd may actually help you by overhearing your request, pointing out that someone "over there" has the item you are looking for.

**Bring an empty station wagon.** Don't get caught buying something bigger than you can fit into your vehicle; bring a car big enough for anything!

**If in doubt, buy it.** When you see something that you really like, but have doubts but can afford it, buy it. While I rarely regret making purchases, I REALLY regret not making them. Hey, if it doesn't work out, you can sell it at next year's Swap Tables.

A "For Instance" moment here, and something to learn from: one year, I had the chance to buy a like-new Kendrick Astro observer tent. I thought to myself, "This is rather large, do I have a place to store it safely at home, and will I use it?" I walked away from this

\$100 tent, which sells for \$800 new. Every time I see my friend Peter Gillette (who purchased it) set up, use and gloat over the tent at Stellafane, I could kick myself for not closing the deal!

**Don't accept the first price.** Use it as an idea of what the buyer is expecting to get from it.

**Go low on your offer.** You're going to meet in between anyway, so try to start small.

**Be prepared or willing to walk away.** Although you are ecstatic about discovering that hard-to-find piece, don't show your enthusiasm to the seller (use your Poker Face). Let the seller know you are serious about the item, but not too serious. If you can't agree on a price, walk away. You can always come back later, but you risk that the piece may be gone. The exception is if this is a hard-to-find item, then you have to decide if you want to pay a bit more. The best price-negotiating tactic is to be willing to walk away if you don't get the price you want. You'll get the best deal if you don't HAVE TO HAVE what they're selling.

**Play dumb when you're in the know and are facing a great deal.** Many people don't know what they have, so if you're educated about what certain things go for price-wise, you can get some great deals. Sometimes you have to play dumb, you know. If you find a great value, you don't want to appear over-eager.

**Stick close to a knowledge person.** There's a few of them that go around from table to table (e.g., Gary Hand from Hands On Optics). You get so you see the same people year after year, and what they're interested in, and what types of things they know. Some of them are competitors with each other; they are also YOUR competitors, but mentors as well. They have specialized niches. They know particular things really well, and they hunt until they find them. Pick your poison: someone you will find bargains with, or someone you will learn from.

**Timing.** Most sellers are ready to call it a day by 10:00 a.m. and may be more willing to negotiate prices about that time. Keep your eyes peeled for any sales that are evidently in the process of packing up.

**May I have a peek at your box?** Paw through boxes; you never know what's in them!

**Watch for scammers,** or people selling things at ridiculously high prices. If everything is like this, leave. They are no good, they will try to pinch every cent they can from you and can easily pull you into paying more money than an item is worth, making the sale a bad deal for you. Only pay a price as such, if you absolutely want it or it is of your highest desire. Even then I recommend that you leave. Also, look out for broken things - that is often why some people are getting rid of them.

**Know how much to pay.** Most sellers come with everything pre-labeled for price. In those special cases where it says, "Everything in this box: 50 cents each," these tend to yield better bargains than sales where the owner has taken the time to mark every item separately.

**Do not make cash for other buyers,** unless they're a friend. You risk being able to negotiate successfully if all your small bills are gone. Believe me, if you do it for one person, another one always seems to notice, and then you're "making change" for multiple buyers!

**Keep the bigger picture in mind.** Sometimes you have to visit quite a few tables to find one that suits your needs, and sometimes you will hit the bargain jackpot at your first table. Remember, you have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find a prince! Those jackpot sales make a morning of shopping worth it for me. Be patient. My best deal of all time came just as I stepped into the Swap Tables in '08; I had on a friend's wish list a pair of high-powered binos, and wouldn't you know it, the first person I came in contact with had a pair of like-new Celestron 20x80's, housed in a gorgeous, skillfully hand-made oak box, all for just \$100. No squabbles there, I just handed him \$100 and skipped all the way back to my car!

If you have a very specific item in mind, your hunt may feel like searching the proverbial needle in the haystack, but if you go with a general list of items you'd like to purchase, you can probably find what you need.

## **POST SWAP TABLES**

### **When you get home...**

Test and clean your items. If you find yourself with a few dirty things, clean them right away. Don't use anything that might damage what you are cleaning. Get ready to "show off" your great finds and buys to your friends and club members!

Do some bookkeeping to find out how much you've spent on gadgets, etc. This will then give you a good idea of how much cash to bring next year. Leave yourself notes to follow next year.

Review your notebook and close the chapter on this year's Swap Tables. **In summary, I find that I have paid 20% of the retail value of my Swap Table finds;** not bad for having a blast!

And, by all means, drop a few bucks into next year's Swap Table's Piggy Bank!

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