

For Champions of Haggling, No Price Tag Is Sacred

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MY husband and I hate haggling. In markets in Istanbul or Jerusalem or Florence, where arguing over price is a high art — and after we have given it our best shot — we always feel we have walked away paying twice as much as the seller expected.

And that they are secretly, or not so secretly, laughing at us.

In this country where you are expected to negotiate over cars and houses, we manage quite well, but do not find it fun or exciting. We just want it to be over.

But I have friends who always seem able to strike a great deal in unexpected areas. My friend Lou negotiates a lower price on the oil delivered to his house. On his credit card rates. On hotel rooms. At the gym.

“People are afraid to ask, afraid they’ll be embarrassed or afraid they won’t get the right answer,” he said. “Seventy-five percent of the time, I get the right answer.”

Lou and other successful hagglers are not worried about appearing cheap, as I am, or being turned down, because they start with a different attitude.

He is not asking for a favor. Rather, he believes he deserves a good deal because he is a good customer.

“I’m not just asking for a discount,” he said. “I’m spending more with you than someone else, and I should be treated better or differently.”

Consumer Reports reported in November that it surveyed 2,167 people and found that 90 percent of those who haggled over furniture, electronics, appliances and even medical bills had received a lower price on at least one purchase in the last three years.

Most of the bargainers said they saved \$50 or more, and in the case of cellphone deals and medical fees, more than a quarter saved at least \$100.

Sally Greenberg, executive director of the National Consumers League, calls herself the queen of haggling and estimates that she gets a lower price 90 percent of the time.

She, like most profitable deal makers, says she never acts aggressive, self-righteous or angry.

“You want to be polite and say ‘could you’ and ‘I’d be grateful,’ ” she said. “You have to have a fine-tuned sense of what’s fair. Don’t chisel people out of things if they can’t afford it.”

Like Lou, if she is a long-term customer, she always asks for a discount.

“I’ve spent many, many thousands at my dentist,” she said. So when she needed an expensive procedure, she asked what his actual cost was versus what she was being charged — and negotiated a lower price.

Ours is one of the few countries where haggling is not generally accepted, but this was not always so, said Herb Cohen, author of the best seller “You Can Negotiate Anything.” Remember Manhattan, the Native Americans and some beads?

“Americans used to have great reputations as negotiators,” said Mr. Cohen, who in his career as a negotiator helped develop the [F.B.I.](#) hostage-negotiating program and was an adviser on terrorism to President [Jimmy Carter](#). “But after World War II, we had a virtual monopoly on almost everything.”

So Americans no longer had to bargain. That can make it confusing to people visiting the United States. I remember when my sister’s soon-to-be father-in-law visited from Israel for her wedding. He was buying dress shoes at [Nordstrom](#) and tried to get the price down.

It did not work.

Our family often chuckled at that story, but the last laugh may be on us. Ms. Greenberg said that department stores are not off-limits to haggling. But a little subtlety might help.

“Ask if the item is going on sale soon — or just came off sale — and whether you can have the lower price,” she said. Often, the saleswoman has coupons behind the counter.

“I’ll ask, ‘do you have a coupon for me?’ and they’ll pull them out,” she said. Or if you have an expired coupon, sometimes you’ve got to beg, and say ‘C’mon, can’t you honor this?’ Sometimes they don’t have the authority and sometimes they do.”

It might help, as Mr. Cohen said, to see yourself as negotiating, rather than haggling, which has an ugly sound and has the connotation of someone willing to wrestle for that last dime.

“You don’t have to be a phony,” Mr. Cohen said. “You can tell the truth. Come in in a genial way, smiling with a low-key pose of calculated incompetence. The key words are, ‘Can you help me?’ ”

Thomas C. Chiarella, a writer for Esquire magazine and a visiting professor of creative writing at DePauw University, once researched an article by spending three months trying to haggle for everything from the street vendor’s hot dog to gasoline for his car.

For Mr. Chiarella, bargaining is not demeaning, but quite the opposite — a matter of connecting. “If you make someone feel seen, then you yourself feel seen, and then they want to make a decision in your favor,” he said.

For example, he had a habit of stopping in a little tobacco store and buying cigarettes for his girlfriend.

“I told the guy, it would really make it worth my while if you could price them like a carton instead of a single pack,” Mr. Chiarella said. In exchange, he would come by every week for five packs.

The vendor agreed, and the trip to the tobacco shop “became something to look forward to every week; I then began to buy cigars.”

That is the ideal negotiation, or in the lingo, a win-win situation.

Hotel rooms are a great place to try your skills because an empty hotel room is lost money. My husband used to work at a place where the woman responsible for reserving rooms for out-of-town guests would always say, “This is our budget — what can you do for us?” With that strategy, we stayed at a beautiful room overlooking San Francisco for \$100.

If you already have a room, see if you can upgrade.

Mr. Chiarella said that when he was taking his son to Le Parker Meridien in New York, he told the reservation clerk that it was his son’s 23rd birthday (which was true) and after a bit of back and forth, spent \$100 on an upgrade that would normally have cost \$300.

“The woman was happy it was my son’s birthday,” he said. “People like making connections.”

Most people I talked to said there were a few things to avoid when haggling. You can say what your budget is, but do not lie and do not plead poverty because it doesn’t ring true.

Even when you think the leverage is all on the other side, it may be worth a try. My friend Anne Marie once got stuck inside her son’s bedroom when the original lock broke off. Her toddler was on the other side.

She shouted for help from a neighbor through the window, and a locksmith came over. He wanted to charge \$200.

“I said, ‘I won’t pay that kind of money,’ and got it down to around \$75,” she said. “It was a game of chicken.”

Here are a few of Mr. Cohen’s suggestions for successful negotiations:

¶Make sure it is worth your time. Generally that means only bargain on big-ticket items.

¶Don't fall in love with anything you're trying to buy — you should care, but not too much.

¶Do your homework on comparable prices.

¶Offer cash rather than a credit card.

¶Remember — you have the power. Money talks, but money can also walk.

Also, keep in mind that the more time a sales representative has invested in a sale, the more he will want to give you a bargain. Mr. Cohen gives the example of trying on three or four suits and deciding on the fifth one.

“They bring in the tailor and the salesman is gleefully writing up the bill. Then I turn to the salesman and say, ‘What kind of tie will you throw in for free?’ ”

It works for free shirts, too.