A Craigslist Pro Shares His Buying and Selling Secrets

If you’re looking for an easy and rewarding “in” to buying and selling online, there is no better option than Craigslist. Far easier than eBay, Craigslist offers more regionally relevant listings for the sharp-eyed shopper, and as a student with an uncompromising taste in good (and often expensive) design, Craigslist was one of the few venues available to me for furnishing my apartment. Through much trial and error, I’ve developed a keen sense of how to buy and sell through Craigslist, and I share some of my insights and tips below...

BUYING

What Craigslist is best for: Although Craigslist is very democratic in its presentation of various classified categories, the market has quickly shifted to favor specific items. For instance, Craigslist is excellent for furniture, materials, and technology, but less so for decorative items. And even less so for items like books and clothing. If you’re looking for the latter, eBay, Etsy, or Amazon are superior online shopping destinations.

Location Matters: Depending on your location, stock can change very quickly — the core structure of Craigslist is similar to the blog model, where the most recent classified posts are at the top and older listings get pushed to the bottom. Checking often can yield great results, as the best deals can come and go within hours. If you’re looking to do some heavy buying (or are searching for a very specific piece), I recommend setting up a daily routine at least 3 times a day (morning, noon, night) to check all the new listings. Patience is a virtue.

Use Multiple Keywords: Keyword searching is your friend. Search often, with a wide array of search terms applicable to the category of product you’re hoping to purchase. For instance, searching for “filing cabinet” or “file cabinet” can return separate results depending on the wordage used in specific auction listings. This is something you should keep in mind when selling as well.

The Free Section: The “free” section is a mixed bag. Some people swear by it, others refuse to bother. Many will post items left out on street corners and will not hold them for you since they understandably don’t want to be bothered with reservations, simply wanting someone to pick up discarded items. But incredible deals can be had if you are quick to the draw and are lucky enough to live nearby house and have a car for pickup. Many free things given away are often good enough to be turned for a profit or used for DIY projects.

Create a Shopping Comparison Spreadsheet: If the item that you’re looking for is very common ("IKEA MALM bedframe") or falls under a very broad category ("midcentury coffee table"), you’ll be faced with a lot of options. Don’t assume the first item is the only one available, nor the best deal. A little extra research and you can find the least used, least expensive, and most convenient to deliver/pickup item. If I come across the same item multiple times, I create a simple Excel document listing the item, its location, the price, and any distinct qualities about it or the seller itself. This way I am able to compare all qualities side-by-side rather than trying to remember them individually. This step may seem trivial for a $10 side table, but will certainly pay off when you’re looking for a high ticket item.

Keep a bookmark folder of Watched Items: If you see something you like, but don’t have the money available, or don’t wish to pay the asking price, wait it out. I scored a white Victoria Ghost chair simply watching and waiting for the right time. Someone posted the chair once, but it never found a buyer, and I emailed them a month later with a much lower price and they accepted.
Purchasing

Contacting the Seller: Contacting the seller is potentially the most crucial moment of the entire sale process, as first impressions are everything. Remember, a seller is not bound by any rule stating who they must sell to. Even though you're the first person to reply that doesn't mean the deal is sealed. Respond in a calm and collected way. Believe me, I realize this can be very hard if the holy grail of your online search comes up out of nowhere for a fair price.

Explain yourself and your intentions as completely, yet briefly as possible. Many sellers are busy people and don't wish to dedicate much time to this deal. If they see that you've written a novel, they might decide to disregard your email. Say who you are, state your interest in the item, confirm how much you'll pay, and when you're available to pick up. If the post asks for a phone number, provide it. If not, ask if they'd like one. Many people choose to deal over the phone as it is quicker than playing email tag.

Bargaining: If you've come across a fairly common item, you could use this as an opportunity to bargain. This is one of the best qualities of Craigslist — there is rarely a fixed price. Bargain early if the price is higher than comparable posts, or late if the item hasn't sold (particularly if the seller keeps reposting it to bring its position back to the top of the first page — I'll talk more about this later.) Of course you want to be considerate when bargaining so as to not offend your seller.

Standing Out From Other Bidders: Try and appeal to the seller if you think you have a particular trait worth mentioning that would help you stand out from other buyers. For example, out of total desperation I've responded to more than one ad featuring a modern design classic, such as the Aeron chair. I explained I was a design student with a meager budget, was in love with the chair and could offer "X" amount. Sure enough, the owner was an architect who, despite receiving numerous emails about it, sold it to me for a lower asking price because I was a student of design, and he knew I would probably appreciate it more than anyone else. So be truthful and be yourself. There are a ton of kind people in the world who might be lenient with the price if you just explain your story honestly.

Picking Up Items: Before planning to pick up an item, always double-check the address and scheduled time, and never leave without a phone number. I've heard horror stories of people planning to meet someone somewhere, with no phone number, and the seller just never shows up. Communication is key.

Be Cautious: Lastly, and I hate having to say this, but it is always good to exercise caution when visiting a stranger's house (or vice versa.) If you feel safer having someone tag along, by all means do that. The majority of buyers who have come to my apartment have brought a friend just as a precaution and I think that is a very smart idea.

Selling

What to Sell: Deciding what to sell is the obvious first step. As I mentioned before, some items do better than others on Craigslist. I always choose to sell my tech and my furniture on Craigslist, but tend to make more money on clothes and books through eBay. Craigslist is an excellent way to sell off a dumpster-find or even turn a profit on an item you bought there. Many times you can find things in very poor shape. After a decent cleaning, the item will look much better and can command a higher price once listed. I've made literally hundreds of dollars by fixing up trashed furniture or low price items and reselling them days later.

One of my favorite stories was finding a mid-century task chair out on the sidewalk as trash. I picked it up on my arm and biked it home — I must have looked completely crazy. I cleaned it up, made a beautiful listing out of it, and sold it for $75. These kinds of opportunities come up on Craigslist on a daily basis. Keep your eyes peeled for these potential moneymakers as you search.

Listing Photography: I cannot stress enough how crucial good photography is to the success of any online sales listing. I'd argue it is even more important than the description itself. Including good photographs is an easy way of
making your product stand out among the competitors. I recommend shooting your items with a DSLR camera. If you don’t have one, try borrowing one from a friend (if you don’t know how to use it, you can find very simple step-by-step tutorials online).

If you can’t secure a DSLR for taking your photos, at the very least try to take them in daylight. Natural lighting will make items look more true in color, clear in detail, and inviting. Another helpful tip is to “stage” your items. Just as you would stage your home to sell, staging your belongings in your house can make them that much more attractive to potential buyers. Don’t be afraid to gussy it up with items you wouldn’t normally decorate with. Look at catalogs or websites for staging tips, such as CB2, West Elm, or Design Within Reach.

Remember to capture and show multiple angles, as well as any unique features (including flaws — remember, it pays to be truthful). Combine all of these photography tips and your posts will jump off the page to potential buyers. It also has a secondary effect that tells the buyer that you care about your items and aren’t liable to screw up the sale.

**The Product Description:** Before you dive into the items you’re selling, get all of the boring information out of the way first. List your location, when you’d be available for pickup, whether or not you’ll accept best offer, if you’re open to trades, types of payment you’ll accept (typically only cash), if delivery is an option, etc. Never include your phone number inside the ad itself.

When you describe your items you’re going to want to break it down two ways: bullet-point comments up top and explanatory text in sentence form down below. For instance:

```
// Eames Rocker
// White
// Fiberglass
// Dimensions
// Price (compared to retail if you’d like)
```

Follow up by describing why you’re selling it, unique features (or flaws) in the design, how you got it, and any additional relevant information. This is your opportunity to really sell the item in words. Remember, Craigslist’s search feature will not only search the title but the description as well, so throw in as many keywords as you can (within reason) to improve search relevancy.

**Offering Delivery:** If you can deliver, it will increase your buyer pool dramatically (especially if it is a large item.) Don’t be afraid to charge a fair fee for your time/gas. I’m an avid cyclist and offer free delivery on my bike if the contents fit in my bag and the buyer is within a certain distance of my house. Include the delivery option in the title itself.

**Embedding Hosted Images:** A very important step when composing your descriptions is to include the photographs you took inside the description itself. This formatting can make a post stand out compared to stock format listings. Here’s how to do it:

You’re going to need to host your images on a free image server. For those of you who don’t know how to already to this, imagehost.org is a favorite of mine. Upload your images and copy their direct HTML link. In the description box, you’re going to want to use the HTML tag: `<img src="url link here">` (without the "") to place your image. This code will insert your pictures into your description. Remember, also include one image in the Craigslist image uploader. This will allow Craigslist to display your photo as a thumbnail when buyers are browsing with the "show image" option enabled.

**Creating a Virtual Garage Sale:** A second tip worth mentioning is advisable if you plan on listing multiple items: add a list of other available items at the end of each item listing. I’ve seen people use this method when they were selling off their entire apartment before they moved. It was a very helpful way to centralize all the data together and offers buyers the ability to review other items they may be interested in purchasing from you.
Choosing Your Title is Important: I always like to use correct grammatical capitalization for titles, and describe my item as directly as possible. For instance: “White Eames Rocker — Authentic Mid Century Design.”

Be mindful of the location field. I like to put the neighborhood within the city in which I’m living. It helps buyers get a better sense of exact location rather than an incredibly broad city name.

Submitting Your Listing: Once you believe you’ve crafted a successful post, go ahead and submit it. Craigslist usually takes a little while before the post itself goes live. Typically, weekend posts tend to do better than weekday posts, and I always like to post mine around late-afternoon, when people are home from errands, but before they head out to dinner.

People tend to repost their ads on a daily basis. This is technically against the rules. I might re-post mine about twice a week (once on a weekday and once on the weekend). Many sellers simply rely on search terms and you should too.

THE SALE

Emails from Sellers: Now you can sit back and get ready for the emails to come in. It is very important to check your email regularly. I recommend using an automatic mail updating service like Microsoft Outlook or Mac’s Mail application. This will let you know nearly instantly when you have a potential buyer emailing with a question or an intention to buy.

Respond as quickly as you can to all emails. People hate waiting especially if it is an item they want badly and can get it from someone else. Expect some bargaining and lowball offers. If your item is popular and you have multiple emails, explain to the lower bidders that you’ll only accept full price due to interest. You’d be surprised how many lowball offers shoot up to asking when they realize they’re in competition with another buyer.

Weeding Out Buyers and Spam: One other point worth making about Craigslist buyers is that some are outright crazy. If you get a frantic email, poorly written in all caps, demanding to pick it up within the hour, I’d probably ignore it or simply explain that it has already sold. Use your best judgment as to who you’d like to deal with.

Spam is also a problem with Craigslist. If you list a high price item, you’re almost guaranteed to receive spam. It is often easy to distinguish spam from the real thing as they’re written in a very generic and broad format (never referring specifically the item in question.) To alleviate this concern, you can request that potential buyers submit a telephone number in their email or make mention of the item specifically.

Final Sale: When you decide on a buyer and make arrangements to meet, be very sure you adhere to those arrangements. If an emergency comes up, let the buyer know as soon as possible. I always like to confirm the day-of when a buyer is coming to pick something up or I’m going to drop something off.

If you’re dealing with furniture like an IKEA piece, it is good to have the tools present to dismantle it (if the buyer is coming to you) or to assemble it (for an additional charge) just in case they don’t have their own. Little things like this can help prevent an easy sale turning into a nightmare later.

Of course be courteous and help load/unload items. If someone is paying in large bills, don’t be afraid to double-check whether they’re real bills and have them authenticated at a nearby bank. If you’re dealing with a very high priced item, I would even recommend going through PayPal. If the buyer is coming to you, ask them to pay before leaving, so all the monetary issues are complete.

Here are some additional helpful tips for using Craigslist from the Apartment Therapy archives:

If you have any specific questions I would be happy to address them in the comment section.

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