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Tips on Selling an Unloved SUV

With gas prices soaring and the accent on fuel economy, it's a tough assignment

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It's an uphill drive for SUV owners trying to sell. High gas prices mean low demand for gas guzzlers, new or used. You might as well be selling space heaters during a summer heat wave if you're trying to unload that Ford Expedition or Jeep Commander. And the last thing a used-car dealer needs from you is another big SUV sitting unsold on his lot.



Cars sit in the parking lot of used car retailer CarMax in Naperville, Illinois.

Ryan Shell is now in his fourth week of trying to get rid of his 2005 Toyota 4Runner. Shell, a marketing supervisor in Winston-Salem, N.C., bought the SUV used for \$23,000 so he could carry his road bike without disassembling it. It's not the worst of SUVs when it comes to gas mileage—it gets about 19 miles per gallon on highways—but it still is costing Shell about \$320 a month to fuel. He often can't even fill the tank because most gas pumps where he lives top out at \$75, almost \$10

short of what he needs to fill it completely.

"Rising gas prices definitely hurt the wallet," Shell says, "but that doesn't mean folks should go out and sell their SUVs for a price that is laughable." On his way to a sale, he has come up with some creative marketing strategies to avoid losing both time and money.

In some respects, though, the odds are against Shell. Used-car values have dropped seven of the past eight months, according to Manheim Consulting, which runs used-vehicle dealer auctions nationwide. In May, the average value of used large SUVs was 24 percent lower than a year earlier, Manheim reports, while the price of compact cars increased by 5.8 percent. Manheim says a mix of higher unemployment, plunging home values, and rising food and energy prices has put consumers "in a funk."

But some people are still buying SUVs, and they are your target audience if you've got one

to sell. "Whether they feel they need one to fit a growing family or they are in a business that requires hauling materials, there still is some demand," says Leslie Vander Baan, owner of Automotive Consignment in Charlotte, N.C., an owner-to-owner car lot where she continues to sell some Hummers and other large SUVs.

Here are a few tips:

Sell to individuals, not dealers: It is harder to get the price you want with dealers, of course, since they need to resell the vehicle at a profit. "You will always make more selling to a private party—an individual—than you'll get in a trade-in," Vander Baan says.

Shell has gone down the usual avenues in trying to sell his 4Runner: He wrote "For Sale" and his phone number on its windows and put it on Craigslist, but he never got much attention. A Facebook ad got the best results. The ad cost a few bucks to post and was viewed by about 100 people. The highest offer he's gotten so far—\$17,000—was just \$700 away from the price at which the SUV was valued at sites like [Kelley Blue Book](#). (KBB values can change daily with demand and other factors.) That's \$5,000 more than he was offered at a trade-in car lot. He also handed out fliers at a nearby college with the Web address where pictures of and details about the vehicle are displayed. In the first few days, four people came to test-drive the 4Runner, but no one made an offer Shell liked.

Leave on bells and whistles: While SUV owners are sometimes advised to take off the rooftop carrier to remove some weight—and be able to advertise better mileage—this could be counterproductive. Any extras that could attract a buyer should be left as they are. What he's learned from inquiries about his SUV, Shell says, is that "people want it as stocked as you can get it."

Lower prices: It may seem obvious, but lowering the price of an SUV to get something for it is better than never selling it at all. Cars can be very personal objects, but try to detach your emotions and view the sale of your vehicle with an analytical eye. "In this climate, you have to be willing to sell your vehicle for less than you think it's worth," Vander Baan says.

She and her husband drive a big 2007 Chevrolet Tahoe, so they know the cost of driving a gas guzzler. The Tahoe eats up about \$3,500 a year in fuel. To ease the pain for buyers, Vander Baan suggests calculating the amount the driver would pay for one year of gas

(based on the standard 12,000 miles per year) and offer to deduct that amount from the price. Shell checks his car's value on the Kelley Blue Book website often, so he can adjust his asking price if needed.

Wait for winter: If you can, wait to sell your SUV until winter, when people are more apt to invest in four-wheel drives and bigger vehicles. "There will be an uptick in buyer interest in SUVs as we approach winter," says Jack Nerad, executive editorial director for Kelley Blue Book. Even with gas at \$4 a gallon, Nerad says, "hanging on to your current vehicle and riding out the current gas prices could be the most economical answer." If you've got a four-wheel drive, it makes sense to wait, Vander Baan says. Right now, "it's the shock in the run-up of the gas prices" that is keeping people from buying SUVs. "Later in the year, it will have diminished."

Shell doesn't like thinking about filling an SUV tank's with pricey gas until winter, but he concedes "it would definitely be easier" to sell then. Until he finds a buyer for the 4Runner, Shell says, "we're buying water instead of wine."

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