

By Emerson Howell Nagel

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## **CONFUSION AND FRUSTRATION OF USING HOUSEHOLD CLEANING PRODUCTS (1,200 words)**

I started out on this article in a sunny, cheerful, positive mood. I was going to espouse the use of soap, baking soda and vinegar, and warn you all against the dire consequences of those nasty toxic cleaners lurking in your cupboards just waiting to poison you and yours. I ended up frustrated, irritated, and more aware than ever of my own ignorance and impotence. And frankly no wiser on the subject of what I should use - or recommend that you use - to keep your house sparklingly clean.

I got the idea for this article from a newsletter I got in the mail called A Real Life. As the title suggests, the newsletter is a warm-and-fuzzy about getting back to the simpler things in life - eating whole grains, using natural fibers, avoiding TV - oh, and there was an article in it on using eco-friendly household cleaning products. As I'd hoped, the writer recommended relying on - you guessed it - baking soda, soap, vinegar, a few commercially available eco-friendly cleaners, and citrus solvent.

The glowing image of a (beautiful) pioneer woman cleaning all her windows with vinegar, and keeping her household fresh and clean-smelling with just soap, water and baking soda, and maybe some fresh herbs sprinkled about leapt into my mind.

So I set out to do a little research, secure in the conviction that science would support my belief in returning to a less chemically-dependent way of life.

My first port of call was Sharon Lieberman, chairman of the Evanston Environment Board and a community liaison on toxins and pesticides. To my mild surprise, she said that unfortunately there really aren't any controlled clinical studies about the toxicity of household products, though there more information out there about the toxicity of some of the ingredients in individual products. But I still felt safe - Lieberman said her personal view was that "If you don't have to use products which you suspect are toxic, and there are less toxic alternatives readily available, why not use those instead?"

But she'd sowed the seed of reluctant doubt. She also shared some research materials with me, particularly relating to citrus solvent. Here I thought of citrus solvent as basically orange juice, which I love and drink by the gallon. So of course it was safe to use to clean my house, and it left it smelling so nice!

Well, Lieberman had given me an excerpt from the Healthy School Handbook: Conquering the Sick Building Syndrome (National Education Association of the United States, Norma Miller, 1995). I was happy to see that it listed as its top four natural ingredient choices for cleaning baking soda, washing soda, vinegar and vegetable-oil-based detergents and soaps. But it had some dire news on the toxicity of d-limonene - the main ingredient in that lovely smelling citrus solvent that I had been sprinkling throughout my house so freely. It's vapors were reported to be "more toxic than that of petroleum distillates or turpentine" - although it is less volatile so would "result in less exposure by inhalation during use."

Hmm. Dark clouds were starting to gather.

Lieberman had also given me this fun little household hazardous waste wheel. It was one of those things with the product at the outside circle, and more information as you moved to the

center of the circle. You turned the wheel to see details on each of the various products. I love these things.

Anyway, it confirmed everything I'd started out believing. And threw around terrifying, toxic-sounding chemical names like hydrochloric acid, paradichlorobenzene, and calcium hypochlorite - that vicious toilet bowl cleaner. Ah, vindicated at last!

But I like to be thorough, and the date on the little wheel was 1993. So I decided to call its authors - the Environmental Hazards Management Institute in Durham, NH, just to check. I spoke at length with EHMI's founder Alan Borner.

And here I went again. Once he burst my bubble, and told me that the wheel was very out-of-date and possibly misleading, Borner was very sympathetic - he'd been down the exact same path himself. His non-profit company was founded 18 years ago to conduct non-partisan research on, among other things, the toxicity and disposal problems of household chemical products. They brought together representatives from industry, poison control centers, environmental organizations and local, state, and federal waste management agencies to form an Advisory Council.

Well, the long and short of it was that after they produced the wheel I'd looked at, they went through 23 revisions. And the new one doesn't mention using any of my old-fashioned favorites instead.

And why not, you ask, baffled and confused? Well, as Borner explained it, the problem centered around two things: the efficacy of a cleaner and how dangerous it really is. Now, he says there's an awful lot of research still to be done, and he is as I write this trying to raise funds for a new study, to look at these very issues. But his conclusion was that baking soda and vinegar, while less toxic, were probably less effective. And that those nasty toxins that I so hated were probably not quite as bad as I imagined.

After thanking Borner politely, I threw my pencil down in disgust and stalked off.

So how am I - your average housewife and mother, with neither the time nor the resources nor the training to conduct the scientific studies required to be sure of what's what - supposed to make up my mind? What was worse, germs or chemicals? And who if anyone could I trust?

Well, after the flames died down, I stewed and stewed. And finally came back to the words of Sharon Lieberman. "If you don't have to use products which you suspect are toxic, and there are less toxic alternatives readily available, why not use those instead?"

What I'm going to do is this. Using my own common sense, for those situations where I - not a scientist, not a toxicologist - think germs are worse than the potentially toxic cleaning products, I'll use the potentially toxic cleaning products. So for cleaning out the kitty litter tray, and for my toilet (since my cats can't drink from the toilet) I'll use the nasties. And maybe for cutting boards with raw chicken on them. And for windows and furniture and floors, and to keep my refrigerator smelling fresh, I'll use my old-fashioned favorites - but without the citrus solvent.

And so what do I recommend for you? Well, unless you want to endow a federal study, or are yourself an expert in the properties and perils of toxic household cleaning products, I'd suggest you rely on your judgment, too. Read as much as you can but making sure both sides are represented, visit the EHMI web site, then just listen to your own gut.

Oh, and EHMI has a new version of that great little wheel - with the latest information available at this point - so call them at 800-558-EHMI (3464) for your copy today! A grown-up one costs \$4.95, and there's a kid's one for \$3.95.

**By Emerson Howell Nagel**

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## **AUCTIONS (860 words)**

You sit in the audience, the expectant hush of the crowd tightening your grip on your paddle, the adrenaline racing through your veins. You've got your eye on almost complete tea set that you suspect might be Limoges, with delicate gold tracings around the edge and only the tiniest nick in the teapot's spout, and it's in a box lot coming up next. You look around you suspiciously. Surely everyone has seen it, and knows that the estimated price on the lot, which is a box that also contains a bunch of linens and some spoons, is too high.

The auctioneer starts the bidding at \$100. For a minute, nobody does anything. You swallow and get ready to raise your paddle and claim your prize triumphantly. Then the crowd goes bananas. Before you can say "my tea set" the price has gone straight through your ceiling of \$150 and has climbed to \$750. You're astonished. Surely the tea set wasn't THAT great?

Well, it wasn't. You hear two dealers behind you say it was that set of pre-Civil War sterling silver teaspoons that drove the frenzy. You feel crushed, ready to throw in the towel, but nine lots later, another pretty little tea set comes up that you'd seen but dismissed as beyond your range. You hear the bidding start at \$100 and just for laughs, you tentatively raise your paddle.

You sit there, not quite sure what to do with your paddle now that it's up there. The auctioneer looks right at you and nods, saying "I've got \$100, do I hear \$125?"

Your pulse quickens. There's a rustle to your right. Someone else - confound her! - raises her paddle. "I've got \$125, do I hear \$150?"

Hmm. Well, that's why you set a ceiling in the first place. You raise your paddle for the last time, happy to see this time that your hand isn't shaking, and look sternly at the auctioneer to let him know that you really mean business this time.

"I've got \$150, do I hear \$175?" Your neighbor looks over at you appraisingly, then shakes her head ever so slightly and puts her paddle down.

The auctioneer looks at you with - or are you just imagining this? - a knowing smile for such a canny connoisseur, but says again, "I've got \$150, do I hear \$175?" You want to strangle him. No, you don't, you want to yell. And in fact, he doesn't. He waits for what seems like a hundred years, then finally says those magic words, "Going once, going twice. Sold to #231 for \$150!"

Few other buying experiences can match the thrill of an auction. You can get some unbelievably great deals - not necessarily what you set out to get, but great deals nonetheless.

According to David Pace, owner of Pace Auctions in Des Plaines, "The beauty of the auction process is that it is one of the only places where people who aren't dealers can buy priceless antiques at dealer or better prices."

"Buying at auction is a great way to invest," says Pace. One of the best deals he remembers is a customer who bought a raggedy looking painting for \$200 and sold it later for \$17,000.

Pace Auctions, which was founded in 1973 by Pace's father, specializes in antiques and estates, getting merchandise from all over Chicago (and once even from as far away as

Massachusetts). They hold regular estate auctions every Monday, where the average lot goes for between \$50 and \$60, as well as specialty architectural salvage auctions, and auctions of fine estates. Pace, who does the actual auctioning himself, suggests getting on their mailing list to find out what's coming up.

There is almost nothing you can't buy now at an auction of some kind. There are the estate auctioneers like Pace, livestock auctions, car auctions, real estate auctions, and of course, now even Internet auctions, where you can buy anything from machinery to software to comic books.

Auction styles vary enormously. There are fun country auctions where you can bid on tractors and pigs and strange pieces of old farm equipment, and where the auctioneers talk so fast you can hardly understand what they are saying. Then there are elegant salon auctions, where priceless paintings by Old Masters sell for hundreds of thousands and even millions, and where the bidders indicate their bids by the merest lifting of an eyebrow. And there are "estate" auctions like Pace's Monday auctions, where for a modest sum, you too might buy a raggedy old picture which will turn out to be fabulously valuable. Or just the right piece to go over the Faux-Chippendale table in the hall.

But all auctions have one thing in common. Whether you come away with the tea set of your dreams, or a signed picture of Elvis – heck, even if you come away empty handed – auctions are lots and lots of fun!

Why not try out an auction at Pace Auctions? They're in Des Plaines at 794 Lee Street. Call them first at (847) 296-0773 to get on their mailing list, and to find out about their upcoming auctions.

## **SIDEBAR ON AUCTION TIPS**

Here are some auction tips that will make your auction experience more fun –and less dangerous!

- Look, look, then look again.** Most auctions provide potential buyers with the opportunity to inspect the goods on auction before the auction starts. Some even provide catalogues, with descriptions of the items and estimated price ranges. Take full advantage, and if you're interested in something, make sure you really know what you're bidding on before you lift that paddle. And remember, in the auction world, what you see is what you get.

- Set a limit.** And stick to it. Auction fever can sweep you off your feet, and it is easy to get carried away in the excitement of the bidding. Figure out the maximum amount you want to spend, be prepared to bid that high, and then force yourself to stop if the bidding goes on past your limit.

- Read the fine print.** Find out in advance when you will be expected to pay for your purchase, whether it can be stored, and if there is a buyer's premium charged. And don't forget to add sales tax, too.

## **SIDEBAR ON AUCTION LINGO**

Like all businesses, the auction world has its own language. The following will help you make sense of most of it:

- Bidding number:** The number assigned to you when you register at an auction, which identifies you as a buyer.

•**Paddle:** A thing shaped like a ping-pong paddle with a bidding number on it. Bidders raise their paddles to indicate that they are bidding on an item.

•**Lot:** A unit of sale that cannot be broken up. Could be one Louis XV chair, or a set of crystal goblets, or a box with some porcelain doll heads and a plastic bag full of old watches.

•**Estimate:** What the auction house thinks a lot will fetch.

•**Provenance:** The previous owner or owners of a piece. Can lend considerably to the perceived value of an item, if the provenance is a famous collection or a museum.

•**Reserve:** The lowest bid the seller and the auction house is willing to accept for an item.

•**Buyer's Premium:** Some auction houses charge a buyer's premium which gets added on top of the price you bid, usually for around 10 to 15%.

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## **CONSIGNMENT 101 (1,163 words)**

You're moving into your new house. The men unload your sofa from the moving truck. They carry it up the front walk, and start through the door. And that's as far as they get. It won't go in. They try going in through the back. No go. They try taking off the door, removing windows, standing it on one end, turning it upside down, pushing really really hard. It just won't fit. Now what do you do?

Well, you could have a garage sale. But you paid good money for it, and you won't get back even a tiny fraction of what you spent. You could put an ad in the newspaper but then you'll have to answer all those calls and have people traipsing through your home. You can't post something in the laundry room because you don't live in an apartment building anymore. So how on earth do you get rid of it?

Try putting it on consignment. In fact, not liking the alternatives is how Dave and Kathie Anderson, the owners of Gabriel's Trumpet, got started in the consignment business in the first place almost ten years ago.

"We were downsizing from a large house, and we had wonderful furniture that we'd paid a lot of money for but couldn't use." Besides an ad or a garage sale, Dave Anderson said "There were no other options, and there ought to have been. Back then, consignment stores that sold clothing were around, but furniture stores were rare, and fine furniture stores weren't around at all."

So they decided to open their own. Today they have two stores, 13,000 square feet in Wheaton, and 10,000 square feet in Chicago. They handle fine fine furniture, whether it was made a month ago, or four centuries ago, as well as fine art, original oils done by auctionable artists, rare books and bindings, china and crystal, sterling and silver plate, and decorative accessories.

How Does Consignment Work? Sharon Elliott, the owner of Elliott Consignment in Chicago, branched out from clothing consignment to include furniture a couple of years ago, and now devotes one whole store to furniture alone. She says people usually bring in a picture of the piece they want to sell, then if she thinks she can sell it, they agree on a price and sign a contract.

Elliott says on clothing you might get one third of the original price. On furniture, figure half the original price, then factor in the condition. "Most sofas [that she sells] go for between \$400 and \$700 if they're in good condition."

This doesn't always hold true, though. "I just recently sold a Thomasville couch. It was probably originally \$2,000, and very well made, but it was a mauve floral, so it wasn't to everyone's taste. I had it for five months, but had to keep marking it down. I finally sold it for \$225 to some young kids from DePaul."

How Much Does the Customer Get? When a piece sells, the split is almost always 50%-50%, according to both Anderson and Elliott. Very occasionally, the owner gets 60%, but that's only on very particular kinds of pieces.

How Long Does It Usually Take to Sell Something? "That's impossible to answer," says Anderson. "Our contracts are 120 days, but if we bring something in we'll sell it. A lot of our

customers are moving... and don't want [their pieces] back. 120 days gives our customer the out to get it back if the family wants it."

But having said that, he adds, "We've had people buy things for thousands off the tail of the truck!" It just takes the right buyer.

At Elliott Consignment they mark pieces down fairly aggressively. Elliott's contracts are for 90 days, but if after the first 45 days there's been no interest in a piece, she marks it down by 25%. And further, if that doesn't do the trick. She says they try not to go to 50% until after 90 days, but urges customers to make a reasonable offer. She tells consigners, "If you still love it, then sell it yourself."

**What Do People Put On Consignment?** Most of Gabriel's Trumpet's consigners are retirees who want to replace a piece with something else. Anderson says they pick up all over the country, but 85% comes from the Chicago area. "Some of the best known people in Chicago have consigned to us, and been our customers."

So they have some very high end stuff. But that's not all. According to Anderson, they get "lots of regular high quality furniture – Henredon, Drexel, Kittinger, Baker - made anywhere in the last five to thirty years, at affordable prices for regular people. You don't need to drive a BMW or a Mercedes!" For furniture, prices range from as little as \$200 to many thousands of dollars.

Elliott Consignment caters to a more middle-income crowd, with furniture starting at \$100 and going up to \$1,500. Says Elliott, "Glass-topped tables with heavy marble bases really sit, so does anything very contemporary. But anything that looks like Pottery Barn or Crate and Barrel flies out. I had a neutral slip-covered couch come in that was gone by 5PM." Or an Ethan Allen four-poster bed with a heart in the headboard that she listed at \$800 and saw in a catalogue for over \$1,500.

**How Do Auctions Compare to Consignment?** Talking about a doctor in Northfield, Anderson relates, "He'd consigned a dining room set to auction, but it didn't sell because it didn't meet his reserve." The auction house told him to come and get it, but since he didn't want it back, they sent him to Gabriel's Trumpet.

"The costs of auctioning can substantially reduce your net realization on the sale and you have a limited degree of control over the price. In consignment," says Anderson, "you both agree on what they put it on the floor for, then you agree on negotiating room. In an auction if you set the reserve too high you can be stuck."

Auctions typically only charge between 10 and 25%, but don't let that fool you. Per Anderson, "You also pay insurance, pick-up, even a listing or photo fee."

**What About Dealers?** If it's not an antique (at least 100 years old), says Anderson, an antique dealer won't touch it. But maybe you have antiques, or you can find a dealer who sells things besides antiques. Why consign instead of using a dealer?

"Let's say you've got a lovely 19th century Regency chest," says Anderson. "A dealer makes more money if he can buy it from you as cheaply as possible. If you bring it to a consignment shop, it's the other way around."

The bottom line is, if you're looking to replace any good furniture that you're tired of, or that just doesn't fit in your new house, or that you're afraid the new puppy will wreck, pause before organizing that garage sale, and consider putting it on consignment instead.

## SIDEBAR ON CONSIGNMENT SHOPS