A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR O‘AHU FAMILIES

How to Run an Estate Sale in Hawaii

What to do first, what never to do, how the money works, and the Hawaii-specific rules that decide what is actually possible with your property.

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Estate sales, downsizing and estate liquidation on O‘ahu

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Who this is for

Anyone on O‘ahu facing a house full of belongings and a decision about what to do with them: after a death, before a move to assisted living, during a downsize, or against a PCS or closing date.

It is written to be useful whether or not you ever hire anybody, including us. If you read it and conclude an estate sale is not right for your situation, the guide has done its job.

ONE

The one mistake you cannot undo

Do not clear anything out before someone has looked at it.

This is the single most expensive thing families do, it is close to universal, and it is the only step on this list that cannot be reversed. By the time anyone realizes, the material is already at the transfer station.

What gets thrown away that should not be

- **Costume jewelry.** The category discarded most often and regretted most reliably. Mid-century and signed designer costume pieces can outperform modest gold.
- **Older kitchen and barware.** Including the contents of every cabinet and drawer.
- **Tools, hardware and the entire contents of a garage or workshop.**
- **Sewing, quilting, knitting and craft supplies.** Consistently strong, consistently binned.
- **Paper.** Photographs, letters, maps, menus, postcards, plantation-era documents, early tourism material. Hawaii-related paper is a real collecting field and it is usually the last thing anyone thinks to check.
- **Anything that looks like junk in a garage.** That description is doing a lot of work and it is frequently wrong.

> ### What you should remove, and should remove early
>
> Take out anything personal, private or legally sensitive before anyone walks through: documents, medications, keys, firearms, and anything you already know a family member is keeping.
>
> Everything else, including the contents of drawers and closets, is better left exactly where it is until it has been looked at.

Why cleaning does not help either

Most preparation families do reduces what a sale returns rather than increasing it. Polishing metal is worse than neutral: on some pieces it removes the surface a buyer is paying for. Repairs rarely return their cost. Sorting into piles destroys the sets and groupings that make items sell.

What genuinely helps in advance is mostly paperwork: establishing authority, and agreeing within the family who is keeping what.

TWO

Work out who has the authority to sell

No reputable company will start work until this is clear, and sorting it out takes longer than people expect.

Somebody has to be able to authorize the sale and sign the agreement. Where the owner has died, that authority comes from the estate, and establishing it is a question for the estate's attorney rather than for an estate sale company.

What Hawaii law provides for smaller estates

Hawaii allows certain personal property to be collected by affidavit under **HRS section 560:3–1201**, in circumstances where:

- the gross value of the estate in this State does not exceed **$100,000**; and
- no personal representative has been appointed or applied for.

Motor vehicles are transferable regardless of value. That section reaches **personal property only**, so real property, and larger estates, generally require a personal representative to be appointed.

> **A correction worth knowing about**
>
> Almost every secondary source states that Hawaii requires a thirty-day waiting period before a small-estate affidavit can be used. **It does not.** That waiting period comes from the model Uniform Probate Code, which Hawaii did not enact on this point.
>
> We mention it because acting on the wrong version of this can cost you a month for no reason. Confirm your own position with your attorney rather than with an article.

Settle the family disagreements first

Disagreement about who gets what is close to universal, and it is dramatically cheaper to resolve before anything has been researched, priced and staged.

The approach that works: anyone who wants something specific says so by a fixed date, and those items are removed from the property or clearly excluded in writing before preparation begins. Items pulled out of a priced sale afterwards pull apart the grouping they were in and cost the sale money.

Work from **one authorized decision-maker** for the sale itself, even where the family is deciding together.

THREE

Choosing the route

An estate sale is one of several options, and it is not always the right one. Most families are only ever told about whichever one the company they called happens to offer.

Route	How it works, and when it suits
Estate sale	The whole household is inventoried, researched, priced and sold, either online or on site. The company takes a percentage of gross sales. Suits a full household with enough content to be worth the preparation.
Auction	Items go to a specialist auction house. Can be the right answer for a small number of genuinely significant pieces. Less suited to clearing an entire ordinary household.
Consignment	Items are placed with a shop that sells them over time. Slower, and works for particular categories rather than a whole house.
Buyout	A single buyer offers a lump sum for the contents. Fastest and simplest, and returns the least. Sometimes exactly right when speed matters more than money.
Donation	Documented donation with receipts. Often part of the plan for what remains rather than the whole plan.

When a sale is not worth running

A percentage-based fee means the company's result tracks yours. It also means a small estate can cost more to run than it returns. Three situations where a sale is usually the wrong answer:

- **There is not enough to sell.** If the contents will not support a staffed sale, consignment, a bulk buyer or documented donation are the routes that remain.
- **The building will not allow it.** Some O‘ahu condominiums prohibit opening a unit to the public outright. An online sale may still work.
- **The timeline does not work.** Preparation is where value is found. A date that leaves no room to research and price properly costs you more than it saves.

Ask any company you speak to which of these applies to your estate. A company that says yes to everything has told you something.

FOUR

Online or in person

This is a real decision with real consequences, and it should be made after someone has seen the property, not before.

An online sale

The contents are photographed, cataloged and listed, the sale runs online rather than as an open house, and buyers collect on a scheduled pickup.

- Far fewer strangers walking through the home
- The sale stays open longer than a single weekend, reaching buyers who could never have attended in person
- Collection is scheduled and controlled rather than open-door
- Often the only route where a building will not permit a public sale

The walkthrough and the photography still happen in the house. Online changes where the selling happens, not how carefully the contents are handled.

An in-person sale

A staffed, on-site sale across an agreed set of days, run with one controlled entry and exit and a staffed checkout.

- Suits a full household where furniture and volume carry the sale
- Buyers can handle and assess pieces themselves
- Clears a large quantity in a short, concentrated window

What the decision actually turns on

- **The building.** If a public sale is not permitted, that settles it.
- **The mix of contents.** Bulky furniture generally wants buyers in the room. Smaller, higher-value pieces travel well online.
- **Access.** Parking, elevators and loading zones decide how many people can realistically attend.
- **Your timeline**, and how much disruption to the household is acceptable.

Some estates are best served by doing both. Ask for the reasoning behind whichever recommendation you are given.

FIVE

The condominium question

A large share of O‘ahu estates sit in condominiums, where the building decides what is possible before you do. This is the first thing to check, not the last.

Every condominium project on O‘ahu operates under its own declaration, bylaws and house rules recorded with the county. Those documents, not the owner, determine what can happen.

What house rules commonly govern

- Whether a unit may be opened to the public at all. Some buildings prohibit it outright.
- Elevator reservations for moving large items, usually arranged through the resident manager
- Loading-zone access, time limits, and which entrance may be used
- Permitted move-in and move-out days and hours
- Certificates of insurance required from anyone working in the building
- Restrictions on signage and on foot traffic through common areas

> **Do this in week one**
>
> Read the house rules and speak to the resident manager before any planning and certainly before a date is promised to anyone.
>
> Finding out in week one that a building will not permit a public sale is a change of plan. Finding out in week four is a wasted month.

If the building says no

An in-person sale is off the table regardless of what is inside the unit. The routes that remain are an online sale with scheduled pickup, moving contents to an off-site sale, consignment, or a buyout.

SIX

What actually sells in a Hawaii household

Local demand differs from mainland comparables in both directions, and national price guides get this wrong routinely.

Category	Notes
Hawaiiana and local pieces	Koa bowls and furniture, Hawaiian quilts, ukulele, surfboards, vintage aloha shirts, Niʻihau shell lei, hula implements, island prints and ephemera. Local demand runs well above mainland guides.
Japanese, Chinese and Okinawan pieces	Turn up regularly in ordinary Oʻahu estates, brought by families over generations and often never thought of as collectible. The range within each category is wide and the difference is not small, so these are researched individually rather than estimated.
Furniture	Sells strongly: well-built solid wood, mid-century, teak and rattan, anything compact. Sells slowly: large formal brown-wood suites, entertainment units, bulky items cheap to replace new.
China, glass and the kitchen	Completeness matters more than people expect. A full service of twelve is a materially different item from a partial set.
Jewelry and small valuables	Fine and costume jewelry, watches, coins, pens, the contents of a dresser top. Held in a supervised case during a sale.
Art	Expensive to guess at in both directions. Anything signed, gallery-labeled, or in a frame worth more than the picture warrants individual research.
The unglamorous categories	Tools, garden equipment, craft supplies, fishing and diving gear, luggage, linens, utility drawers. Rarely a headline item, frequently more in total than the antiques.

Where a piece genuinely warrants a specialist's opinion before it is priced, a good company will say so rather than estimate. Formal written appraisal is separate specialist work, done by an appraiser. It is not part of running an estate sale.

SEVEN

How pricing and commission work

Estate sale companies are almost always paid a percentage of what the sale earns, deducted from the proceeds rather than billed to you upfront.

What the market charges

National estate-sale directories and cost guides commonly report the following, describing the US market broadly rather than Hawaii specifically:

Situation	Commonly reported range
Overall US range	Roughly 30 to 50% of gross sales
Most common band	35 to 40%
Larger, higher-value estates	Toward 30 to 35%
Small estates, or heavy preparation	45 to 50%

A lower percentage is not automatically the better deal. A rate quoted before anyone has seen the property, or one that excludes preparation you are later billed for, can cost more than a higher all-in number.

What moves the rate

Two things: what the sale is likely to earn, and how much work it takes to get there. The labor is close to fixed while the revenue is not, which is why a smaller estate carries a higher percentage.

Factor	Toward the lower end	Toward the higher end
Expected gross	A full household with substantial furniture or collections	Partly cleared, or mostly low-value contents
Preparation	Contents intact and ready to sort	Heavy accumulation or years of stored material
Research load	Ordinary household goods	Collections, art, Hawaiiana or Asian antiques
Access	Driveway, ground floor, easy loading	Elevator reservations, restricted loading, long carries
Timeline	Several weeks available	Compressed by a closing or move-out date

What an estimate should actually settle

An estimate means the **terms** are agreed: the scope, the rate, the sale format, the schedule, the settlement terms, and the plan for anything unsold.

It is **not** a prediction of what your estate will earn. Nobody can promise that figure honestly before the sale has run.

EIGHT

A realistic timeline

For a typical single-family household, expect a few weeks from walkthrough to settlement. Sorting and researching is the longest phase. Photography and cataloging take a few days. Settlement follows the close of the sale and the reconciliation of the accounting.

Larger properties, estates with collections needing research, and properties with restricted access take longer. You should get a specific schedule with dates in writing rather than a vague estimate.

Compressing the window is possible and it usually costs money, because the items that need research are exactly the ones carrying the most value.

NINE

Disposal, which is harder here

On O‘ahu you cannot simply put a household at the curb. This has to be planned as part of the sale rather than assumed.

Bulky-item collection on O‘ahu is **by appointment only**. In practice:

- A residence may schedule up to **five bulky items** per appointment
- Metal appliances are handled on a **separate appointment, limited to two**
- Long items and bundles are capped at roughly **six feet and sixty pounds**
- Televisions and other e-waste are **not accepted at all**

> Decide what happens to unsold items **in writing before the sale**, not on the last afternoon. The realistic options are reductions as the sale closes out, a bulk buyer for the remainder, documented donation with receipts, specified items returned to the family, and disposal of the rest. Ask who pays for which.

TEN

Humidity, and why waiting costs money

Sustained humidity is hard on upholstered furniture, leather, paper, textiles, photographs and electronics. A house that has been closed up for months can deteriorate faster than families expect.

Solid wood, ceramics, glass, metal, jewelry and most collectibles hold up well.

The practical consequence: if a property is sitting empty while an estate is settled, the contents are not holding still, and delay has a real cost attached to it. This is worth weighing against the very natural instinct to leave everything alone for a while.

ELEVEN

If you are PCSing or moving off-island

A relocation sale is scheduled backwards from a hard date, and it usually runs alongside a household that is still being lived in.

For military families there is a second constraint that turns this into a financial calculation rather than a sentimental one: **weight allowances are set by rank, dependency status and move type, and exceeding the allowance is charged back to you after the move.** Furniture, appliances and bulky goods are typically where the sell-versus-ship decision gets made.

What works

- Schedule the sale **before pack-out**, not after
- Define a clear "not for sale" zone: the items going with you, separated and ideally in a closed room
- Give the company the hard date at the very first conversation, so they can tell you plainly whether it is achievable

TWELVE

Questions worth asking any company

- What is your commission, and what does it cover?
- What is **not** covered, and what would I be billed for separately?
- Is there any upfront cost?
- Can you run the sale online as well as in person, and which suits my estate?
- When do I get paid after the sale closes, and in what form?
- Will I get an itemized accounting of gross sales?
- What happens to what does not sell, and who decides?
- Are you insured, and for what?
- Have you run a sale in a building with house rules like mine?
- Who is actually on site during the sale?

Ask for the answers in writing. A written scope that names the exclusions is worth more than a lower headline percentage.

THIRTEEN

The checklist

- [ ] **Stop.** Clear nothing until someone has looked.
- [ ] Remove what is personal, private or legally sensitive.
- [ ] Establish who has authority to sell, with the estate's attorney if needed.
- [ ] Agree within the family who is keeping what, by a fixed date, in writing.
- [ ] If it is a condominium, read the house rules and speak to the resident manager.
- [ ] Work out your real deadline and what is driving it.
- [ ] Get a walkthrough and a written scope from at least one company.
- [ ] Check the scope names: the rate, the format, the schedule, the settlement terms and the unsold-item plan.
- [ ] Agree the disposal plan and who pays for it.
- [ ] Read it, compare it, and take it elsewhere if you want to.

If it would help to talk it through

The consultation and the walkthrough cost nothing and commit you to nothing. If an estate sale is not the right route for your situation, we will say so and tell you what is.

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Industry comparison figures are drawn from published national estate-sale cost guides. Hawaii general excise tax is levied at 4% statewide plus the City & County of Honolulu surcharge of 0.5%, giving 4.5% on O‘ahu, with a visible pass-on rate of 4.712%. Nothing in this guide is legal, tax or accounting advice, and it is not a substitute for advice from your own attorney or tax professional about your specific circumstances. HiEstateSales does not provide appraisal services. Published by HiEstateSales, a service of Hawaii Property Advisors, Inc. Brokered by Hawaii Property Advisors.