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Trusting a stranger was sink or swim

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Reader comment: Trusting a Stranger Was Sink or Swim "This reaffirmed the simple yet monumental power of trust." -- Tom Boysen, Livonia

The bathroom sink was a deal, just \$86 on eBay.

My friend Mark figured he saved at least \$1,000. Other pedestal sinks he looked at new, and in antique shops, were going for the price of a nice weekend in Paris.

But the sink was in North Carolina. And Mark and his unfinished bathroom are 500 miles north, in Pennsylvania.

Shippers told him, sure, they'd be happy to haul it up for, oh, about \$400. Yikes, Mark thought. He has no friends down there. So he turned to strangers.

He checked the University of North Carolina Web site and scoured e-mail addressed to a couple dozen students. He found Internet newsgroups for Carolinians, for RV'ers and for truckers.

He posted the same note to all, explaining that he didn't want to pay a shipper \$400 to haul the 250-pound, cast-iron sink, but would pay someone \$200 to bring it north.

One guy said sure, he'd do it as a lark for the bucks, then realized he'd have to spend the night and wouldn't net enough cash for the effort.

No student answered. Said Mark: "College kids today just aren't hungry enough."

A matter of trust

And one trucker was discouraging: "Suppose it gets damaged in transit and you decide not to pay the guy who carried it up so he keeps it? Or you decide he needs to pay for fixing the damage? Or he decides he wants \$350 instead of \$200 and isn't going to hand it over for a penny less? You could sue, but suppose you got a judgment for a piddly amount. Then what?"

"You'd learn an expensive lesson. I'd spend the \$400 and sleep better knowing things will go smoothly."

Mark didn't want to succumb to fear of his fellow man at a cost of \$200. Nor, though, did he feel entirely comfortable anymore with his plan.

So when an average guy named Randy e-mailed to say he was driving up to New Jersey last weekend, Mark checked him out first.

On the phone, Mark heard no partying in the background. Randy sounded like a solid citizen, but really, how can you tell anything over the phone? When he ran Randy's name through www.whitepages.com, he found that Randy had an address in Ft. Mill, S.C., and a wife, Susie. "Good," Mark thought. "The wife suggests some stability."

Mark told me, "All I needed was a little sign. After that, it was a great big hunch."

A deal done

Late afternoon on Sunday, the two men shook hands at a highway rest stop near Philadelphia.

From the trunk of his Ford, Randy lifted the base of the sink, wrapped in padding and plastic, and handed it to Mark. He lifted out the top, too. Mark put both in his station wagon without checking their condition.

Mark handed Randy an envelope containing ten \$20 bills. Randy folded it and tucked it in his back pocket, without counting its contents.

Mark thanked Randy and warned him away from an accident up ahead on the freeway. Randy thanked Mark and drove off.

When Mark unwrapped it, the sink was in perfect condition.

Randy and Susie are on vacation in New Jersey, so I couldn't ask for their perspective. But Mark says he learned two things: "Take a chance." And, "Don't watch too much TV news." That's the end of this story. That's all there is, two strangers, in this age of anxiety, making a deal without demanding any guarantees from each other.