

Goodwill is Losing Its Good Will

It was supposed to be a simple errand after open-heart surgery: buy a cheap bathroom scale so a patient could track his weight at home. His family drove to their local Goodwill, expecting a basic secondhand model for a few dollars. Instead, they found six used scales on the shelf. The cheapest cost \$16, scratched and battery-free. A quick search on a phone showed a new digital scale on Amazon for \$14, batteries included. For many loyal customers, that kind of scene now feels less like an error and more like proof that Goodwill is no longer the bargain refuge it once was.

To see how a charity built on affordable hand-me-downs reached this point, it helps to rewind to 1902. Methodist minister Edgar Helms began collecting unwanted clothing and household goods from wealthy Boston neighborhoods and hired people in poverty to clean, repair, and resell them. Sales revenue paid wages and financed training programs. The basic idea—donations in, jobs and services out—still underpins Goodwill’s model.

What has changed is the scale and style. Goodwill Industries International now sits at the center of a network of roughly 150 regional nonprofits in the U.S. and Canada. Local organizations run thousands of thrift stores and outlet centers, plus warehouses and online platforms. Donated goods are sorted and priced, then sent to shelves, bins, or e-commerce sites. After covering rent, wages, transport, and trash, the surplus is supposed to fund job training and placement services for people who struggle to find steady work. Shoppers spent about \$5.5 billion in Goodwill stores last year, roughly 37% more than in 2019.

That surge mirrors a wider boom in secondhand shopping. The U.S. resale apparel market has jumped from around \$28 billion to nearly \$49 billion in just a few years, as consumers look for ways to save money, cut waste, and avoid wardrobes that mirror fast fashion. Thrifting has moved into the mainstream, and Goodwill now sits where charity, sustainability, and big retail converge.

Inside many stores, the transformation is easy to see. The dim, cluttered shops that once smelled of dust and mildew are being replaced by larger, brighter locations with wider aisles and more curated displays that resemble off-price chains like T.J. Maxx. Real-estate teams now chase sites in affluent suburbs and busy shopping corridors, where donors can drive up, pop the trunk, and drop off bags of barely worn clothes—sometimes including designer labels.

Goodwill is also courting a new kind of shopper. Regional organizations have paid TikTok creators to film short “haul” videos showing off vintage jackets, quirky home décor, and brand-name jeans. These clips recast Goodwill as a destination for eco-conscious Gen Z customers and resellers, for whom thrifting is a hobby and side hustle rather than a financial necessity.

The problem, critics say, is that prices have climbed with the image. Online discussions are full of complaints about “thriftflation” and claims that Goodwill has become a “greedy powerhouse.” Shoppers describe Dollar Tree or 99-cent-store items—sometimes with the

original \$1.25 sticker still attached—marked up to four or five dollars. Others say it is often cheaper to buy discounted new goods at Ross or T.J. Maxx than to shop secondhand at Goodwill.

Part of the explanation is operational. Workers in sorting rooms may handle thousands of donations a day, so many regions use standardized price bands: all small electronics at one flat number, all games at another, all jeans at another. That system saves time but produces strange results, where a cheap plastic toy and a high-quality board game end up with the same sticker, or a scratched generic scale lands in the same price band as a premium model that costs less brand new online.

Digital strategy reshapes the experience as well. Goodwill's auction site, ShopGoodwill, has become a major channel for high-value donations: vintage audio equipment, collectible game consoles, jewelry, and designer bags are often pulled from local stores and listed online for national bidding. For the organization, that extra revenue can fund more programs. For in-person customers, however, it means the "treasure" part of the treasure hunt is removed before they even walk through the door.

Goodwill defends its pricing by pointing to the real costs behind "free" inventory. The organization must pay rent on thousands of locations, fuel for trucks, insurance, and fees to dispose of damaged or unsellable items that arrive in donation bins. In many cities, commercial real estate has become more expensive. Regional leaders argue that if prices do not rise, stores will close and training programs will shrink.

Critics counter that the burden is falling on the wrong people. Goodwill's structure includes dozens of regional CEOs and executives, some with compensation packages in the high six figures, while many front-line employees are paid at or near minimum wage. For a shopper staring at a \$16 used scale, the contrast between those internal economics and the charity narrative is hard to ignore.

In the end, what matters most is not the mission statement but the moment at the rack. When a donated item costs more than a new one, the word "thrift" starts to feel like branding rather than a promise. If Goodwill keeps chasing middle-class treasure hunters while pricing out families who shop out of necessity, it risks losing the very "good will" that made the name powerful in the first place.

- 1) Have you ever bought something from a thrift store or donated items there?
- 2) Do you think a nonprofit like this should be able to charge any price they want?
- 3) Is buying secondhand seen as "cool" or something only for people with low incomes?
- 4) Is it okay to overcharge shoppers if it helps the unemployed?
- 5) What do you think is the main cause behind "thriftflation?"

Bargain	(n)	something bought for less than the usual or expected price	Getting this winter coat for half price felt like a real bargain.
Cluttered	(adj)	filled with too many things so that it looks messy and disorganized	The desk was so cluttered that there was no space left to put down a notebook.
Converge	(v)	to come together or meet at the same point from different directions or sources	Different trends in fashion and sustainability converge in today's secondhand market.
Court	(v)	to try to attract or win the support, attention, or business of someone	The company has been courting younger customers with social media campaigns and discounts.
Décor	(n)	the style of furniture, colors, and objects used to decorate a room or building	The café's cozy décor makes it feel like a friend's living room.
Dim	(adj)	not bright or well lit	The hallway was so dim that I had to use my phone flashlight to see.
Errand	(n)	a short trip you make to do a specific task, such as buying or delivering something	I need to run a quick errand before dinner, so I'll be back in 20 minutes.
Figure	(n)	a number or amount that represents a particular quantity or statistic	Last quarter's sales figure surprised investors and boosted the share price.
Hand-me-down	(n)	a piece of clothing or other item that is passed from one person to another, usually older to younger	As the youngest child, he wore hand-me-down jackets from his older brothers.
Haul	(n)	a set of items that someone buys or collects at one time, especially shown together in a video or photo	She showed off her thrift-store haul in a video that got thousands of views.
Mildew	(n)	a type of fungus that grows in damp places and causes a musty smell and spots	We had to clean the bathroom walls carefully to remove the mildew and smell.
Mirror	(v)	to look like or be very similar to something else	The new office building mirrors the modern style of the company's brand.
Mission statement	(n)	an official written statement that explains an organization's main purpose and goals	Their mission statement emphasizes access, dignity, and opportunity for people in need.

Pop the trunk	(phr v)	to open the trunk of a car quickly and casually	He pulled over, popped the trunk, and helped the volunteers load the donation boxes.
Powerhouse	(n)	an organization or person that is very strong, successful, and influential	The small startup quickly became a powerhouse in the online payments industry.
Recast	(v)	to present or describe something in a new or different way	The documentary recast the company's history in a more critical light.
Refuge	(n)	a place or situation that provides safety, comfort, or protection from difficulty	For many people, the local library is a refuge during hot summer afternoons.
Resemble	(v)	to look like or have many of the same features as someone or something else	The new logo is simple but still resembles the original design.
Rewind	(v)	to go back to an earlier time or point in a story, situation, or recording	Let's rewind to last year to understand how this problem first started.
Secondhand	(adj)	owned or used by someone else before and then sold or given to another person	She bought a secondhand laptop that still works perfectly for her online classes.
Thrift	(n)	the careful use of money and resources, or the practice of buying and using things cheaply	Her parents taught her thrift, so she always compares prices before buying anything.
Thrift store	(n)	shop that sells secondhand items, usually donated, at low prices to raise money for a charity or community organization	She furnished her first apartment almost entirely with furniture from a local thrift store.
Thrifting	(n)	the activity or habit of shopping at thrift stores or buying used items	On weekends, they love thrifting together to find unique clothes and furniture.
Wardrobe	(n)	all the clothes that a person owns or wears regularly	He updated his wardrobe after changing jobs so he could look more professional.