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TAKING CONTROL OF PAPER CLUTTER BEFORE SELLING YOUR HOME

A big psychological barrier stood in the way of an emergency room doctor's plan to move to a new condo. To sell his apartment, he would have to pare down his voluminous collection of books, scientific journals, newspaper articles, catalogs and unsorted mail. "His place was completely chaotic," recalls Monica Friel, the owner of a professional organizing company.

It took several days for Friel and a crew of assistants to help sift through the man's collections. But when the job was done, and more than a quarter of his belongings had been tossed, his place looked presentable and he could push forward with his move.

Paper is a huge impediment to moving for many people, according to Friel, who is affiliated with the National Association of Professional Organizers (www.napo.net).

Clearing out clutter of any sort is important to all home sellers who want the best possible price for their properties, says Robert Irwin, the author of several real estate books.

"Realtors know that only a fraction of the population can see beyond the clutter to the essence of a home and its potential. A place always looks way too crowded when it's crammed with stuff," Irwin says.

Here are practical ideas for homeowners who need to plow through pile upon pile of paper before they can put their properties on the market:

- Consider the de-cluttering process as an opportunity, not a problem.

Professional organizers know that those who save too much can't retrieve valued documents or other memorabilia when they want to. Examples are passports or precious love letters from a spouse.

"Unsorted stuff turns into burdensome junk that weighs you down rather than enhancing your life," says Friel.

She says good organizers can help the chronic pack rat decide what to discard and what to retain.

"You don't want to throw away all your life history and your past," she says.

- Try to avoid postponing the solution to your clutter issue.

The self-storage industry is burgeoning and profitable. And it's tempting for those who cling to an excessive number of unsorted belongings to simply stash them in boxes and haul them to a storage rental unit.

But Friel cautions against that idea. "For many people, self-storage is a big trap. They kid themselves into thinking they're going to drive over to the storage unit and go through that stuff. But they never do," she says.

Also, the fees for self-storage can mount up quickly, especially for the kind of "climate controlled" unit you'd want for valuable memorabilia.

- Set limits on how much you'll take to the new home.

Home sellers who are planning to move to smaller quarters typically find it necessary to reduce the overall volume of their belongings. But even those moving to a more spacious place often seek to lighten their load.

"When people move, most want a fresh start, without a lot of old junk," Friel says.

One effective way to cut down is to set a limit on how many box loads you'll take. For instance, you might allow yourself just one "keepsake box" for each of your children, to store report cards, sports trophies, artwork and other items.

- Establish guidelines on which possessions you'll retain.

As anyone who's spent days culling through belongings can tell you, the toughest part is deciding what to save and what to let go. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers.

What's important, according to Friel, is that you establish criteria in your own mind -- category by category.

When it comes to books, she suggests that you question whether you'll truly have time to give all your favorite novels a second read. If later you want to re-read a book you had discarded, why not borrow a copy from the library?

When going through photos, she recommends you sort them into piles, based on a general "timeline" of your life. When you realize how much you have from each period, you'll be more willing to let go of duplicates.

Before throwing out financial papers, such as mutual fund statements, you may wish to find out how easily you can retrieve the same information from the Internet. And ask your accountant what receipts you'd need in case you face an IRS audit.

- Consider seeking outside help to clear through your accumulations.

Many people find it easier to let go of excess belongings if a friend or relative sits with them during the process.

Those interested in moving quickly may wish to hire a professional organizer, says Irwin, the real estate author.

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