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## Why the Container-Store Guy Wants to Be Your Therapist

Organizers, Storage Retailers  
Delve Deep Into Your Closets;  
Tears in the Parking Lot

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Kimberly Hansen met with a professional last year and poured out her feelings about the stress of her recent move, the busy routines of her three children and her longing for peace instead of "uncertainty and chaos."



The meeting wasn't with a therapist. It was with a consultant from California Closet Co., a company that creates systems to help organize people's stuff. The consultant was helping Ms. Hansen convert a room into an area for school bags, jackets and a place to do home projects like gift-wrapping.

"I felt I really spilled out my life to her," says Ms. Hansen. "I think it is going to be a relationship we have for a long time."

With competition heating up in the growing home storage and organization business, some retailers are adopting therapy-speak when hawking file cabinets and shoe racks. Much like professional organizers, retailers are training their staff to offer more advice and make emotional connections as they help customers buy shelves or sort sweaters. And some companies are increasingly marketing products from file folders to closets as items that can improve everything from your exercise habits to your relationships.

The companies are pitching a whole-life upgrade, not just a tidy bedroom. New ads by San Rafael, Calif.-based California Closets, an affiliate of [FirstService Corp.](#), say "Home & Life: Simplified" and its Web site promises to bring "a sense of harmony and order" to customers' lives. The founders of Buttoned Up Inc., a company that sells items like binders to help people organize their important papers, pitches their products through weekly advice columns in local papers with

tips on how to overcome "organizational inertia," and how to "spark romance" by making regularly scheduled dates with your partner. (Those dates are easier to schedule if you're organized, they point out.)

**Emerson Electric Co.**'s ClosetMaid, a maker of closet and storage systems that is based in Ocala, Fla., has a new "chat" tool on its Web site that asks if customers are going through "life events" such as marriage or retirement and if organization makes them feel "in control." The companies' latest tactics nod to feng shui, the ancient Chinese practice of arranging space to achieve harmony.

Retailers say the sale of organizing products lends itself to instant intimacy with customers, because questions and answers can quickly get personal. "You do find out about eating habits and talk about undergarments and things like that," says Dan Lerma, manager of a Container Store in Portland, Ore.

Sometimes, things can get a little too personal. Joe De La Cruz was working at a Container Store in San Antonio and frequently helped a woman who was having trouble getting her home office and small retail business organized. One day, Mr. De La Cruz helped carry some boxes to the car and she burst into tears, saying Mr. De La Cruz was so much nicer than her husband, who never helped her carry anything and wasn't as interested in her business.

**Getting Organized**

- Discard any clothing not worn **in two years**
- Keep a recycling bin near your mail so you can **discard junk mail immediately**
- **Create a notebook** for articles and recipes so magazines don't accumulate
- Put bins and boxes on lower shelves to encourage children to **put away toys**
- To get started organizing, put on your favorite music, and **tackle one mini-task a day**

Source: California Closets, Buttoned Up, National Association of Professional Organizers

"It definitely felt awkward," says Mr. De La Cruz. "But I just kept a smile on face and was very supportive."

Manufacturers sold \$5.9 billion worth of home-organization products in 2004, up 23% from 1999, according to the most recent data available from Freedonia Group, a market-research firm in Cleveland. The demand for custom closets has grown so much in the past several years that manufacturers, designers and installers a year ago launched a new trade association, the Association of Closet and Storage Professionals, based in Wheaton, Ill., that is developing certification to ensure professionalism in the industry. Americans spent about \$2 billion in 2006 on custom closets, up 20% from the prior year, according to estimates by the association.

The demand for professional organizers -- who generally come into people's homes and can spend weeks sorting through junk and giving organizational advice -- is also booming. The National Association of Professional Organizers, based in Glenview, Ill., has grown to 4,000 members from 2,000 since 2003, says President Barry Izsak.

"A professional organizer looks at the situation with a fresh set of eyes and we take their lifestyle and habits into account," says Mr. Izsak. They often bring in an element of emotional support, as well, listening to people who feel overwhelmed by disorganization or advising on time-management.

Now, some retailers are taking the same approach. In the last year, the Dallas-based Container Store has taken sales training beyond products, emphasizing how to engage with the customer on an emotional level and how to better listen to the customer's organizational problems through role playing, says Casey Priest, vice president of marketing. The staff needs to be attuned to such issues and develop an "emotional connection" with the customers, she says.

For example, Mr. Lerma, of the Portland store, says one employee will pretend to be a woman asking about belt storage, but might drop clues about how her husband's closet disorganization is driving her crazy. The employee is trained to listen closely and then maybe suggest a closet makeover, with separate his and her spaces to avoid conflict. "When someone comes in to organize belts or shoes, there's usually a bigger problem," he says.

Some retailers speak of their organizing work as a crusade, touting the transformational power of an orderly space. California Closets recently revamped its Web site to say that "California Closets believes our customers ... are to be afforded the greatest dignity and honor when exploring and discovering what it is that will bring a sense of harmony and order to their lives."

Gayle Radley grew so close to Container Store employees during an overhaul of her Washington home that she threw a party for them. The 25 staff members had worked with her for months on closet and storage design -- and advised her through four different do-overs of her mudroom.

"It was very cleansing," she says. "I wanted to acknowledge people and give them praise."

But not everyone shopping for storage items wants to forge such bonds with their would-be organizers. Seth McBean, a 28-year-old high-school aide, was pleased when he walked into a Container Store in New York recently looking for a toiletry kit and was directed to the bathroom-products area without further questioning. Says Mr. McBean, "When people start asking me all sorts of questions, I start to wonder, 'What are they trying to sell me?'"

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