

How to Streamline Your Life

Feeling choked by your possessions? Maybe it's time to unload. By Amy Larocca

IT HAS BEEN, UNTIL RECENTLY, much too easy to amass much too much: too many dresses to keep track of, too many cell phones to use, too much jewelry that sits unworn, too many books that languish unread. We have garages in which we can no longer park, walk-in closets in which it's impossible to take a step.

But it's a new year and a new reality, and a lot of us are feeling the need to pare down, to cleanse our living and storage spaces of the excess goods we've been quietly collecting. So much of what is clogging our closet and attic arteries could be of tremendous value to someone somewhere else, and in certain cases we might even be able to earn a little something for ourselves, too.

But how? And where?

➔ Experts!

IF YOU ARE missing the organization gene (and many fantastic, wonderful, intelligent people are—have you ever seen the photo of Einstein's desk?), perhaps the best idea is to hire a professional organizer. This individual will take on as much or as little as you like and will whip your closets—and you—into shape.

Melanie Charlton Fascitelli, of Closette (closet organizing starts at \$1,500; 212-337-9771; clos-ette.com), for example, is the kind of woman who absolutely can't stand anything out of place. Marvelously no-nonsense and direct, she's based in New York but regularly tackles messes all over the Eastern Seaboard. Truth is, she'll

go wherever she's called, having flown as far as Hong Kong and Riyadh to help rid clients of clutter. She's not intimidated by stature or fame, either; she's sorted out Liv Tyler, Sting, Drew Barrymore.

"We put together a game plan, a strategy for your closet," Fascitelli explains. Her strategy for my monstrously stuffed situation involved a serious edit of my belongings. "Once you have your things well-organized," she says, "you realize how much less you need." (Fascitelli's book on the topic, *Shop Your Closet*, includes such commandments as "Honor thy pants and thy sweaters," by which she means to stop crowding them together and squashing

their will!) Fascitelli also designs furniture to facilitate the systems she puts in place—closet shelves and home-entertainment cabinets. Perhaps the most breathtaking weapon in her organizational arsenal is the subcontractor she employs to turn your music into MP3s and then dispose of your compact discs. Fascitelli is well-known for such extreme touches. "She even had playlists made for me!" raves a client.

Leigh Williams (\$150 per hour; 713-526-8500) is a lifestyle organizer in Houston who's adept at convincing clients to purge. "I'm finding, in this economic climate, that people are paring down in just about every aspect of their lives," she says. "Even the überwealthy. I've been unloading never-used, storage-stuck furniture, clothing, even jewelry." When it comes to clothes, she typically does a mix of donation and resale, and she organizes auctions for furniture with style-appropriate dealers. (She uses one for antiques, another for midcentury modern.) "Leigh is so organized that she could be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company and it would be like a part-time job," says client Kristi Schiller.

➔ Resale and Consignment

NO MATTER WHO DOES the organizing, all that stuff needs a place to go, and lots of women like to resell their valuable designer clothes, either outright or by consignment. (Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, for instance, was known to resell.) Consignment shops generally prefer clothing that is in excellent condition, and anything with the tags still on that you're ashamed to admit you've never worn can certainly be consigned. Typically, you call a shop to set up an appointment to bring in your clean, well-preserved goods. The store will advise as to what is being accepted, such as clothes for a particular season or in certain sizes. And once you arrive, a staff member assesses what you've got and assigns a resale value.

Don't expect to recoup anything close to retail—an Armani suit bought for \$4,000 at Neiman Marcus would probably go for far less than half that at a consignment shop. The standard deal for high-end consigning in a brick-and-mortar (rather than an online) store is that once your outfit sells, you split the proceeds fifty-fifty with the shop.

Things change when you get to the premium vintage market—that is, clothing at least twenty years old and in nearly perfect condition. There, prices tend to be higher, particularly if your pieces are from important collections by designers no longer working or living.

Houston: Couture Blowout (713-520-7585) is run by Fatou Fall, a former employee of the late, great Mix: Modern Clothes, the trendy Houston boutique that closed in 2007. Fall knows all her old Mix customers, and she works with them on

wardrobe strategies and edits the closets in their homes. Whatever's not being worn gets packed up and brought to the shop—and that can mean Narciso Rodriguez, Balenciaga, Lanvin. (She also accepts consignment.)

Los Angeles: Because there are red-carpet events most nights, L.A. is possibly the best city for getting rid of extremely high-end—as in couture—dresses. **Lily et Cie** (310-724-5757), in Beverly Hills, a West Coast pioneer in the field, deals in exquisite gowns and bags; even dresses worn at

accepts all manner of wares on consignment, from deconstructed Marni dresses to more mainstream pieces, such as a shearling coat by Michael Kors. **Michael's** (212-737-7273; michaelsconsignment.com), on the Upper East Side, resells wedding dresses, those sentimental space hogs, and **Designer Resale** (212-734-3639; designerresaleconsignment.com), also on the Upper East Side, deals in clothing for men as well as for women. **Roundabout** (646-755-8009), on East 72nd Street, has satellite shops in the Connecticut suburbs.

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Buckingham Palace, for example, have turned up at the shop. **Decades** (323-655-0223), specializing in extra-glam fashion from the 20th century, buys flawless-condition couture and haute designer pieces outright (consignment is done only very rarely). Right next door is **Decades Two** (323-655-1960), which sells on consignment and is less strict in its requirements.

New York: With four locations downtown and one uptown, **Ina** (inayc.com)

Palm Beach: The island and its environs are home to several excellent consignment shops. On a block of Sunset Avenue known as Consignment Row, near the Breakers, you'll find **Déjà Vu** (561-833-6624), a standout boutique known for its swift turnover of very delicately worn Chanel. Off Sunset, not too far away, is the **Church Mouse** (561-659-2154), where local nob F. Warrington Gillet Jr.'s monogrammed Louis Vuitton luggage wound up after his death, in 2002.

➔ Electronics

IF YOU BUY a new product from Apple, Dell or any of several other companies, most manufacturers will take your old version for recycling, no matter what brand it is. Otherwise:

Earth911.org is a great source for figuring out how to get rid of things—including those that beep and buzz and get plugged into the wall—in a green way. Searches by zip code identify drop-off locations for everything from your kind-aslow laptop to the Xbox that's been gathering dust since Christmas 2004.

Cell Phones for Soldiers (800-426-1031; [cell](http://cellphonesforsoldiers.com)

[phonesforsoldiers.com](http://cellphonesforsoldiers.com)), founded by a school-aged Massachusetts brother-and-sister team, has 7,000 drop-off points in the U.S., and it also accepts used phones by mail. The actual phones are not reused by the soldiers; they're sold to a company that recycles the parts, and the organization then uses that money to provide prepaid calling cards to U.S. troops. Everyone wins!

And (who knew?) most **Best Buy** stores (bestbuy.com) host weekend recycling events to which you can bring any old electronics equipment you've got kicking around.

➔ Giving It Up

NOT ALL CLOTHES have much resale value, which is not to say that they wouldn't be of tremendous use to someone in need. There are any number of great options in every city for donating used clothing—Goodwill and Salvation Army stores chiefly among them—and such donations carry with them the advantage of a tax benefit. Recipients of donated goods can't assign a value to what you donate, however; that's up to you. The best advice, always, is to consult your accountant about how to value your donations and establish what amount is a reasonable deduction. Here, a few other organizations

well-known for their efficient use of contributions.

Nationwide: Every closet organizer I've surveyed (as well as quite a few of my less-organized friends) recommends **Dress for Success** (212-532-1922; *dressforsuccess.org*), whose numerous affiliates accept clothing donations throughout the U.S. It's a great cause: DFS's goal is to help needy women in its programs schedule job interviews. Once they do, DFS "personal shoppers" will outfit them in your donated suits (or other business-appropriate duds); and when the women land jobs, they come back for a week's

worth of clothing suitable for their new offices. The group has aided 450,000 women since it started, in 1997.

Los Angeles: The Colleagues (310-828-1619; *thecolleagues.com*) is a women's organization in Santa Monica that, since 1950, has raised more than \$6 million for the Children's Institute, a local agency that works with kids who have been abused and exposed to violence. Nancy Reagan is a longtime supporter of the Colleagues, as is another first lady, Maria Shriver. The group's Santa Monica thrift shop accepts donations of designer clothing—it typically has pieces by Valentino, Chanel and Escada on the racks—as well as jewelry and housewares in good condition.

New York: When it comes to drop-off donations, many New Yorkers swear by **Housing Works** (212-366-0820; *housingworks.org*), a charitable chain that accepts clothing, books and furniture. Dropping off is fantastically easy: plop your donation on a counter at one of HW's seven stores, fill out a tax form, and you're on your way. Proceeds from the sale of your old stuff fund projects aimed at ending the AIDS crisis, as well as coping with AIDS-related homelessness. If you have more than a few bags, the group can arrange pickup service.

San Francisco: Helpers House of Couture (415-387-3031), located on Fulton Street and run by volunteer Joy Venturini Bianchi, specializes in prestige ready-to-wear (Galanos, Ralph Rucci, Mainbocher). A sister store on Ghirardelli Square, **Helpers Bazaar** (415-441-0779), sells less-high-end clothing (new and vintage) and household goods. One hundred percent of the proceeds from both locations are donated to the developmentally disabled. Bianchi is happy to receive donations in person, but if getting to San Francisco is unrealistic, she gladly accepts donations by mail as well.

➔ Furniture

GETTING RID OF furniture is more complicated than doing the same with clothes. If you have museum-quality antiques, contacting a large auction house—Sotheby's, Christie's—for an appraisal is probably the best place to start. It can also be helpful to monitor 1stdibs.com, an online compendium of antiques stores. By registering, you will be able to see the inventories of top antiques shops all over the States and abroad, and this can help you understand the market rate for what may be sitting in your garage. For instance, you can find out that a good-quality pair of Robsjohn-Gibbings chairs can fetch \$9,500 or more, while the price of Knoll sofas varies greatly, depending on upholstery and condition.

For individuals wanting to sell their own furnishings, one avenue is to work with a reputable small auction house. **Lewis & Maese** (713-880-0891; *lmauction.co.com*), in Houston, recently sold pieces at auction for client Lynn Wyatt after she downscaled from a mansion and had no place for many valuable antiques.

Doyle New York (212-427-2730; *doylenewyork.com*) is an auction house based in New York City that also does free appraisals at its regional offices in Washington, D.C.; Scottsdale, Arizona; and other locations. It accepts photographs by mail and e-mail, and also hosts walk-in appraisal days every Friday in its New York gallery, during which a team of specialists evaluates jewelry, paintings, furniture, decorations, silver, prints and books (limit three items per person).

You might, however, be able to find a local store that will handle your furnishings, such as the **Chris Ellis Consignment Collection** (561-659-1919; *chriselliscollection.com*), in West Palm Beach. At CECC you'll work with the staff to establish a net price for your piece, and when the item is sold, you get that amount no matter what (this is done to avoid the problem of a retailer's marking your merchandise down and leaving you with a tiny check at the end). The shop specializes in many areas, including Art Deco, with older pieces by Karl Springer and Baker.

➔ Fine Jewelry

OF ALL THE THINGS you're clearing out, fine jewelry often carries the most emotional freight. Acquired during times of great happiness (engagements, anniversaries) or sadness (inheritance), it's treasured whether it's worn only on special occasions or every day.

There are plenty of good ways to sell it, auctions being the most traditional. Doyle holds fine-jewelry sales, and now there are even online auctions. Portero.com does a brisk business with name brands such as Bulgari and Chopard.

But auctions can be public, and the process can take time. It was with both factors in mind that Circa (877-876-5493; circajewels.com) was founded, in 2001. "We treat everyone who comes in as well as they were treated when they

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bought the piece," says CEO Chris Del Gatto. The process works like this: after setting up an appointment—the company currently has five offices in the U.S. and one in Hong Kong—you bring in any jewelry (except costume) you choose, from a simple gold bangle to an

heirloom diamond tiara, and a representative will evaluate it and write you a check on the spot. Period. Your meeting will be conducted in a private appraisal room or at an off-site location if you can't get to a Circa office.

Circa can handle big pieces (such as the 50-carat cushion-cut canary diamond that Del Gatto bought in Geneva), but if your wares are less extravagant, never fear; nothing, he says, is turned down. And if you aren't willing to part with the piece for the offered price, you're welcome to pack it up and head home, no questions asked. In turn, Circa sells only by invitation to private clients, many of whom are collectors. It's hard to estimate what jewelry will fetch in relation to its retail price; insurance appraisals, for one, tend to overinflate expectations. "We base our evaluation on the materials, of course, and the desirability of the piece in the market," Del Gatto says. But he offers a rough formula: for a \$10,000 bracelet (perhaps appraised at \$12,000), 30 to 45 percent of the retail price is a fairly reasonable expectation for reselling it—so the piece might bring its owner around \$4,000.

➔ Selling Online

IF YOU DON'T live near a great consignment shop—or if you're a homebody—the Internet is definitely your best option. Many people find selling things on eBay arduous: there's the PayPal account to set up, and also the well-lit photographs that must be taken and posted online. Much of your success in selling on eBay is dependent on your track record; it's a system

that relies on trust, and if you haven't spent time building that up, buyers may treat you with skepticism or caution. And then, of course, there are the trips to and from the post office.

If you can't be bothered, there are excellent vendors to take over for you, and they handle everything, from soup to nuts. All you have to do is collect your check.

Jemznjewels.com is particularly good.

The New York-based site trades predominantly in handbags, with an emphasis on Hermès, as well as in a small but well-edited selection of shoes, and jewelry by Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels. Super-accommodating owner Rachel White makes house calls in the city and is unique in the consignment world for dealing with clients one-on-one to figure out what works best for them: she'll buy bags outright or consign them, and she doesn't have a hard-and-fast policy on pricing. She is also particularly in touch with her clients' collections, so she can often think of a buyer for your bags (especially if they're Hermès) on the spot.

Linda Lightman (shoplindastuff.com) is a Philadelphia-based ex-lawyer who is one of eBay's PowerSellers, a fantastic accomplishment that means her goods are likely to sell much more quickly than yours would, were you to auction them. She sends UPS directly to your house to pick up your stuff—you just have to box it up—and then she'll sell it all on eBay and send you a check for 75 percent of the sale price if an item sells for over \$1,000 or 65 percent if under \$1,000, which is far higher than the amount offered by most consignment shops. For Lightman, who deals in high-volume turnover, it's worth it.

Portero.com is eBay without the garden gnomes: only top-end, authenticated luxury goods are auctioned off here. The site specializes in watches, jewelry and bags and is quite specific about which brands it accepts—Cartier, yes; J. Crew, no. (Chanel 2.55 handbags, for example, are regularly priced above \$2,500 on Portero.) When you consign here, the site sets a minimum price for your stuff; but if no buyer bids at that level, the deal's off. The average sale on Portero, though, is \$1,800—of which your cut is 70 percent—so odds are you'll receive the kind of return that you're expecting. ❖