

THE SAVINGS GAME

Throwing out clutter can reap savings in time, money

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Show me inkblots and I see piggy banks. So it's only natural that when Jeff Davidson spoke, I heard ways to save money.

Davidson, a management consultant, makes about 60 speeches a year on conquering clutter and time. I met him aboard a cruise ship where he gave a lecture.

"Our population experiences increased time pressure with each passing year," he told a couple of dozen people in the audience, including me. "The key to winning back and maintaining control of your time is not allowing unnecessary 'time culprits' to creep in.

"Some of the biggest culprits are junk mail, subscriptions, mismanaged reading, pack rat-ism, and other people's clutter."

By now, my RoboSaver brain was churning. I talked to Davidson after his lecture, and he agreed with my theory: You are on your way to big savings once you start getting rid of clutter.

"All around me I see people over-collect," he



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told me. "Society contributes to it because it provides an overabundance of material goods.

"We see a person who has two or three Walkmans, several telephone answering machines or several hand-held telephones... I call this electronic addiction.

"People subscribe to different magazines, and they keep piling up, and they think they are going to get to them, but they never do.

"You can buy enough knickknacks to fill your house, so eventually you would have to buy another house.

"People hang on to things as if they are going to use them again. In reality, their heirs are the ones that will deal with them by throwing them out."

Davidson, from Chapel Hill, N.C., knows what he is talking about. He is the author of 18 books, the most recent "Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society." The thing is, the more he talked about getting rid of clutter and saving time, the more I thought about saving money.

For example:

"You can reduce correspondence time by creating your own speedy-reply letters to the mail you receive," he suggested.

"Copy the letters you receive (but wouldn't that cost money, I wondered?) or use the bottom portion or reverse side (now, that's better) to jot down the response. Then fold the letter and send back the

reply, on the same day."

And another mail tip:

"I never throw away a large envelope,"

Davidson said. (Neither do I.) "You can cross out one side and use the other. You can always fold it over and write on the side.

"I haven't bought a large envelope in five years," he added. "Plus it is in vogue to recycle."

I asked Davidson whether he read any magazines. He told me he does — in the library. So do I, unless I can get my boss to pay for the magazines as a business expense.

"I dropped all my subscriptions," Davidson said. "I am not anti-magazine; there are a lot of good magazines. But the reality of our existence is that there is more information out there than we can ever get to."

Rather than read every issue of a magazine, Davidson suggests reading only some. "Every fourth issue will do."

"There is no 'keeping up,'" he said. "We have an explosion in the number of things competing for our attention. The response to try to handle it all is a noble response, but it is a losing response.

"All around me I see abundant materialism that is largely fueled by the media. We have been programmed since birth to believe we have to keep up, but it is OK not to read the paper every day, or to go a whole weekend without reading anything."

I am part of the media, but I agree. So I asked Davidson, why do people accumulate?

"It's a matter of security, retaining a piece of the past," he said. "Everything that happened in the past is glamorized. When a rock musician dies, people will flood the record store to buy a piece of the past.

"But are they buying it because they want it, or have they been induced, and are they going to use it?"

Davidson was talking to the right guy. I don't buy things I don't use and pay no attention to the hype in ads. Hey, my wife and I did not even buy a souvenir on the cruise.

Which can have its downside: When we docked at the port, the immigration inspector kept questioning me about my customs declaration that we hadn't bought anything. He followed us as we headed for the car, called my name out loud and forced us to open our bags. You mean you went to Jamaica and Grand Cayman and didn't even buy a lousy T-shirt?

No, we didn't. The only thing we brought back was a one-page handout by Davidson, "Learning to chuck junk."

Humberto Cruz welcomes questions and comments from readers. Although he cannot respond to each one individually, he will answer those of general interest in his column. Write to Cruz in care of this newspaper, P.O. Box 119, Orlando, Fla. 32802-0119.