



CLEAN SWEEP

Is it time for your company to hold a brand rummage sale?

By: Andrea Syverson

I think it is fair to say we all have a place either in our homes or offices that we hope others won't see. Whether it's the crammed-with-nothing-valuable-but-can't-yet-throw-it-away closet or the toss-it-all-in-here-who-really-cares junk drawer or the three car garage with no cars in it or the musty attic boxes or the sagging basement shelves, we all have someplace that just doesn't pass Martha Stewart muster. These places don't look like those perfect Pottery Barn or Container Store catalog spreads (thus the reason, they are called *aspirational!*) no matter what bins or functional-yet-decorative shelves we buy. We have just accumulated too much stuff.

Many Americans are feeling overextended, overstuffed and overspent. Although we seem to be feeling the effects of this more recently, it really isn't a new problem. Way back in 1986, comedian George Carlin told us we all had too much stuff. In his funny monologue on "stuff," he reminded us: "A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down; you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff.... Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore. Did you ever notice when you go to somebody else's house, you never quite feel a hundred percent at home? You know why? No room for *your* stuff! Somebody else's stuff is all over the place..."

Well, if our homes or offices can accumulate too much stuff over time, so can our brands. Brands can suffer from a case of *avoirdufois*, a word describing a heaviness and a ponderousness, a burden. Our brands indeed can be burdened by too much stuff. We pile on more and more business activities. At times our various departments go off in conflicting directions; our channels get promotion heavy and our profit potential gets bogged down with "good" stuff but perhaps not the best. We know that focusing on doing good things is indeed the enemy of doing what is truly the best...but we keep doing good. Good is easier than best. Good habits are hard to break.

So, what are we to do? How do we air out our brands and see what we've got in our brand attic, closets, junk drawers and garages that no longer works for us or more importantly, for our customers?

Post-Spring Cleaning

Summer is the season all across America for rummage sales, garage sales, tag sales. Statistics show this activity is up for 2009. **Is it time you conduct an internal brand rummage sale?** Eric Harvey, president of Walk the Talk, and his co-writer Steve Venture share, "Our brains are like closets. Over time they are filled with things we no longer use – things that don't fit. Every once in awhile they need

to be cleaned out.” **I suggest brands and the people who manage and create them (and stuff them full!) schedule a brand review and clean up day. And soon!**

Yes, you prepare for these just like you would if you were having one at your own home. Yes, you have to include the boss (Procter & Gamble’s CEO A.G.Lafley understands his main role to “be one of deciding what business they are in and what business they are not in.”) Yes, it is a lot of work hauling out all that junk and facing bad decisions, irrelevancy and places where the brand overspent needlessly or just totally missed the mark or forgot to get their customers’ opinions on crucial decisions of impact to them. **But ask anyone who has had a successful garage sale recently and one of the post-joys they describe is the letting go of all the past mistakes and the saying goodbye to all the things that keep you feeling, well, rather, *very avoirdupois!*** The things you’ve had to work around. The misunderstandings. The confusion. The brand clutter. The irrelevancy of certain communication materials, of procedures that are outmoded. Harvey and Venture remind us: “Our baggage includes everything from once valid beliefs and practices that have outlived their usefulness, to misinformation and misconceptions that we’ve accepted (and even embraced) without much examination not thought.”

Perhaps you’ll even uncover some sacred brand cows that get broken (positively!) in the moving and reviewing process. Management expert Peter Drucker counsels, “It’s easier for companies to come up with new ideas than to let go of old ones.” **Letting go is what a rummage sale is all about. All the physical and emotional energy around this activity will help your brand move from good to best.**

Regain Your Focus

Just when you are tired and think you’ve had enough, I encourage you to keep going. Get all the way to the back of the brand attic. Just like when you helped your grandma clean out her cluttered spaces years ago, **you are likely to uncover some real brand treasures back there, some brand valuables that you might have overlooked or forgotten that were buried in the chaos.** Things like: one-of-a-kind brand “antiques” (such as the owners’ original passion!) or glimmers of useful ideas that were not acted upon or customer suggestions that fell through the cracks but now appear to be spot on for implementation. Clean spaces invite possibilities, clearer thinking, new beginnings. Oh, the joy of seeing things from a fresh and roomy perspective!

Brand rummage sales often happen with new leadership. These new leaders see the brand junk a bit more clearly. They come on board ready to take action. When Home Depot’s new CEO Frank Blake took the reins, he focused on the process of returning the company to its roots and selling off non-core businesses like its EXPO division. Recently, in a press release this summer, Blake announced three areas of strategic focus: customer service, product authority, and productivity and efficiency driven by disciplined capital allocation. Rummage sales allow room for more of the *best* things.

Two of my clients, a women’s apparel company and a financial services firm both recently appointed new presidents. In both cases, these leaders wasted no time in uncovering what was holding these companies back. By implementing a new brand fit chart, the women’s apparel company was able to let go of items that no longer represented the brand well. By eliminating products that no longer worked, they were able to showcase those that did with more provocative selling space.

The financial services firm held a collaborative interdepartmental strategic planning session and discovered that each division was working too independently of one another. This method served the

organization well for years but in today's customer-centric business arena, this company had to shed its silo approach and embrace a more unified, cross-departmental marketing approach.

But rummage sales can also work when existing leaders decide they just can't keep doing things the way they've always done them. Another client of mine, a specialty children's clothing company, realized that the two co-owners were not delegating, were not mentoring any successors and were not as in tune with their customers' changing needs as they liked to be. So we had a rummage sale fierce conversation of sorts and are developing an action plan to tackle these issues one at a time.

Brand rummage sales are more than a way to shed some *avoirdufois*. They are also cathartic. They have the potential to free brands and their creators from what is holding them back, draining their energy, taking them off focus. **These brand cleaning and cleansing days encourage us to change our ways, to make “stop doing” lists alongside of all the “start doing” lists we have. They help us become more intentional editors and strategic questioners and energy collaborators.** The benefits of the fierce conversations that occur around all of these topics can help brands leap forward into new vistas unencumbered.

Jim Collins, a highly acclaimed author perhaps best known for his “*Good to Great*” book is a serious practitioner of intentional editing. According to a profile of him and his latest work in *The New York Times* this month, he is able to produce such meaningful books on management and leadership because he purposely focuses his time on just three main tasks. By ruthlessly editing out all the activities that don't align with those three goals, he is able to marshal his energy for the very best.

So, roll up your sleeves, get a little dusty and dirty and work hard lugging the old stuff out. Take time to reminisce and savor the once forgotten treasures. Toss all that is irrelevant. Let go of the past mistakes. Then stand back. Look at the clean space. Breathe. Smile. Make George Carlin and your customers happy that you paid attention. Hopefully, you've got less stuff.

And, hopefully, it's nothing but the *best* stuff!

Got too much stuff? Andrea Syverson can help. She is the founder and president of IER Partners, which has guided and strengthened brands of all sizes with savvy best practices for creating customers for life. Combining her passion of adventurous listening and working across diverse industries, her “outsider-insider” creative branding and merchandising expertise and objectivity has been valued by companies as diverse as Ben & Jerry's, Celestial Seasonings, CHEFS, Boston Proper, SmartPak, Spanx and World Vision. She holds an MBA and has dedicated more than 20 years to providing clients both domestic and international with innovative approaches to branding, product development and creative messaging. She is the author of two books in which she shares her hands-on approach for both brand building and creating customer-centric products that enhance brands: *ThinkAbout: 77 Creative Prompts for Innovators*, and *BrandAbout: A Seriously Playful Approach for Passionate Brand-Builders and Merchants*.