

### **Clutter-Free Gift Giving – Embrace It!**

By now, many of us are knee deep in holiday gift planning and shopping for those lucky folks who made it back on our holiday gift lists. (If you are finished, good for you – you are more organized than you know!) This season, consider gifts that will be well received and used by your recipients, chosen with their needs, hobbies and interests in mind.

Consumable gifts such as gourmet food items, homemade meals or treats, food/drink/flower club memberships are fitting for a wide range of people, and are good choices for limited budgets. Gifts of service are always appreciated and can include babysitting vouchers, car wash tickets, and salon certificates. Consider gift certificates for continuing education classes (art, language, computer) or lessons to hone skills or explore hobbies (exercise or dance, cooking, music). Buy tickets for an upcoming event or membership passes to local cultural arts organizations. Your recipient will appreciate your thoughtful gift and be excited that they won't have to find a place for it!

### **Other Topics in this Issue:**

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### **Quick Tips: Manage Junkmail and Solicitations, Safe-Guard Your Identity**

#### **Catalog Overload: Manage Your Pile and Help the Environment**

Once you've completed your holiday catalog purchases (and narrow down the catalogs you actually use), visit [www.catalogchoice.org](http://www.catalogchoice.org) to put an end to unsolicited catalogs. *Catalog Choice* is a sponsored project of the Ecology Center. The mission of *Catalog Choice* is to reduce the amount of repeat and unsolicited catalog mailings and promote the adoption of sustainable industry best practices.

This service is free to consumers and businesses and registration allows you to select the catalogs you wish to decline. *Catalog Choice* contacts these retailers on your behalf,

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requesting your name be removed from their mailing list. This service is designed for continued use, as you can visit the site repeatedly to decline additional unwanted mailings. Visit the *Catalog Choice* website for more information, sign up for 2008 and spread the word!

### **Unwanted Solicitations and Junk Mail: Stop Them at the Source**

Once you've handled unwanted catalogs, re-register your telephone number on the National Do-Not-Call Registry to stop telephone solicitations. If you signed up in 2003 when the program first took effect, you'll need to register again since it's only good for five years. Sign up online at [www.donotcall.gov](http://www.donotcall.gov) or call 888-382-1222.

To curb junk mail, contact the Mail Preference Service of the Direct Marketing Association to get off as many national mailing lists as possible. The charge for this service is \$1.00 (anti-fraud verification fee) and like the Do Not Call registry, you have to re-register with the DMA every five years. Go to [www.dmaconsumers.org/cgi/offmailinglist](http://www.dmaconsumers.org/cgi/offmailinglist) or send your request and check to DMA, P.O. Box 643, Carmel NY, 10512.

Lastly, while you're on this paper-reduction roll, stop unsolicited credit card offers by signing on to an "opt out" list managed by the major credit bureaus. When you sign up, the credit bureaus will no longer provide your name and information to banks, credit card companies and insurance company marketers. Visit [www.optoutprescreen.com](http://www.optoutprescreen.com) or call 888-5-OPTOUT (888-567-8688). You can opt out for five years or permanently, and if you should need additional credit in the future, you can reverse your request to receive offers again.

### **Safe-Guard Your Identity: Invest in a Shredder!**

*Holiday Wish List Item # 1: cross-cut shredder.* If you don't own a shredder, do yourself a favor and get one this month. With the number of identity-theft cases rising annually, the easiest way to safeguard your financial security and personal identity is to make a habit of destroying unwanted junk mail and personal paperwork. Not all junk mail needs to be shredded, but you should destroy all paperwork pre-printed with personal information, especially pre-printed credit card offers. (Stop them all together by opting out of future mailings, see above.) By trashing paperwork with personal information, you run the risk of identity theft and the possibility that others are seeking credit in your name.

To monitor your personal credit history, order a free credit report from each of the three major credit bureaus (Experian, TransUnion and Equifax) by visiting [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). You are entitled to one free report per bureau each year, so it's advised to order a copy from one company every four months to ensure each of the three bureaus has the most accurate information in your file.

## Feature Article: Organizing Your Kitchen – Make it Work for You!

Staying organized in our home is a battle that we all fight daily, especially with competing demands for our time from jobs, children and a growing list of activities. We tend to focus whatever organizing time we can spare on tackling the most egregious piles of clutter throughout our living areas. For most of us, the maintenance “pick up” is about all we can manage during the busy week!

Yet, of all the rooms in the home that become cluttered with reminders of our day, **kitchens receive the least attention, and the most demands.** In our quest to deliver quick, homemade, healthy meals to our families, have we ever considered how much prep time could be shaved off at mealtime by working in an organized kitchen? The kitchen is a great place to start if you wish to develop and maintain good organizing habits and skills that are easily transferable to other spaces. If you feel fairly organized already, re-evaluating your space from time to time offers the opportunity for improvement and a fresh perspective on your culinary environment.

**Assess How You Use Your Kitchen.** To maintain a functional kitchen that performs for us, it’s important to periodically assess who uses the space and how we use it.

- ✓ When you put away dishes or pantry products, do you ever think about why you put them where you do? (“...only available space” is not the answer I’m looking for!)
- ✓ Does their location offer the best use by you and your family?
- ✓ Do you have baking items occupying prime cupboard space when you only use them a few times a month, if that?
- ✓ Are large, rarely used items and appliances hogging space on precious work areas and active cupboard shelves?

By taking stock of what you and your family require on a day-to-day basis, and by actively organizing items by how they are used, mealtime preparations will seem easier and more enjoyable.

**Plan Time to Accomplish Small Tasks.** Planning your space is an essential first step to any organizing project. Acting on your plan takes only a dedicated time slot and the mindset to accomplish it one task at a time. Here’s a simple yet effective approach:

- ✓ Plan a day when you have at least one uninterrupted hour (and put it on the calendar).
- ✓ Clear a table or counter for sorting items.
- ✓ Have bags or boxes in the room to collect items for donation, relocation or trash.
- ✓ Begin with one area of the kitchen (e.g., cupboards above the sink, pantry, etc.) and work clockwise around the room as you have time.
- ✓ Remove all items from shelves to your work area and sort by use.
- ✓ Purge or relocate items that you don’t like, use or need routinely.

**Organizing Strategies for the Kitchen.** Below are some additional ideas to think about as you go about the necessary task of streamlining your workspace.

**1. Who uses the kitchen and what do they do?**

- ✓ If you are the primary cook, products and equipment should be stored at your eye level and reach.

**2. Are the most frequently used items in view or within reach of the sink, counter and stove?**

- ✓ Review the contents of your active cupboards, purge old or unused items, and move contents around if necessary to maximize access to the cook's essential tools.
- ✓ Communicate to other family members (repeatedly if necessary) where certain items should be stored and why.
- ✓ Most kitchen shelves are adjustable and products such as shelf risers and turntables work wonders to maximize space and keep ingredients and spices organized.

**3. If you have children, help them meet their own needs by planning the kitchen around their abilities.**

- ✓ Designate one or more accessible pantry, refrigerator, and storage drawer or shelf for your children. They will appreciate the ability to make their own breakfast and lunch, as well as the freedom to get their own snack and drink supplies.

**4. Are frequently used items within reach?**

- ✓ Make it easier for kids to help with chores (e.g., unloading the dishwasher, setting and clearing the table, putting away groceries) by storing frequently used items on accessible shelves.
- ✓ If you have younger ones, devote lower drawers or cupboards for kid-friendly pots or plastic storage containers.

**5. Identify shelves and cupboards that are both at capacity (e.g., pantry) and underutilized (e.g., cupboard above refrigerator, other high spots).**

- ✓ Relocate items that are not actively used to upper shelves or to off-site pantry or basement storage (bread machine, baking pans, pitchers, serving plates, holiday items).
- ✓ Purge items that are no longer used or have multiplied (sport cups with straws and coffee mugs are common offenders in this category).

**6. Evaluate the contents and quality of items in your pantry.**

- ✓ To create space, remove foods that no longer circulate to your dinner table.
- ✓ Consolidate opened snack and cereal boxes.
- ✓ Refrain from purchasing more items until you reduce your current inventory.
- ✓ Save money by keeping a current list of pantry items stored elsewhere to minimize duplicate purchases.

As you stand back and admire your work, know also that your kitchen will be a more functional and desirable place to cook!

## The Six O'Clock Scramble – Quick and Healthy Meal Planning

Now that your kitchen is organized for maximum efficiency (see feature article), test your culinary skills with an easy solution for creating fast, healthy, homemade meals. A fresh voice in the do-it-yourself culinary market is *The Six O'Clock Scramble*, an affordable weekly recipe subscription service founded by local businesswoman and cookbook author Aviva Goldfarb. The weekly email subscription includes a delicious 5-day menu plan, ideal for busy weeknights, and a shopping list, cross-referenced by recipe and organized by food type. Aviva also shares cooking tips, side dish suggestions, nutritional information and a dose of down-to-earth insight on a wide range of subjects in her accompanying written column.

*The Scramble*, as it's affectionately known to subscribers, is a perfect gift for anyone interested in eating healthier, saving money, changing poor eating habits, or being inspired by new, easy and healthy meal ideas. This service is ideal for busy families, singles living alone or with groups, working couples and retirees. The subscription is available for a 6- or 12-month duration, and arrives by **email** weekly on Wednesdays so you can plan for the upcoming week. You can use Aviva's weekly plan, or log in to customize it to your family's tastes or dietary needs. Visit [www.thescramble.com](http://www.thescramble.com) to sign up, give a gift, or request a sample menu plan. As a subscriber you have access to the full *Scramble* recipe database where you can search by food item, recipe, or category and design custom menu plans that suit your preferences (or your cupboard!).

As one of many faithful (and grateful) subscribers, I am not alone in realizing the benefits of a ready-made meal plan that can be tailored to your schedule, tastes, dietary needs and budget. Meal planning is not a new concept, however in our fast-pace world we tend to cut corners in our diet and waste more of what we buy than we use. One of my favorite features of *The Six O'Clock Scramble* is the subscriber comments section of the website. I "hear" firsthand how this meal planning service re-energizes even the most uninspired (or inexperienced) cook, helps households to stay on budget and develops healthier eating habits in children (and adults) who need it the most.

The most important benefit, however, is that *The Six O'Clock Scramble* provides a foundation for change and employs strategies that deliver success (or at the least a meal on the table!). Successful organizing systems such as *The Six O'Clock Scramble* empower you to plan better and work more productively in other aspects of your life.

## WDC-Area Community Resources: musiKares, A Wider Circle

### Donate CDs for a Cause – musiKares

Earlier this year I highlighted the efforts of musiKares, a charitable CD-collection and donation program founded and run by local businesswomen Lisa Flaxman, owner of musiKids®. As we approach the gift-giving season, peruse your music shelf for CDs that you once enjoyed (now that your *itunes* and MP3 habit has become firmly established) and consider donating music to the musiKares program, which benefits cancer patients (young and old) at the Georgetown Lombardi Cancer Center. Portable CD players

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(personal size) in working order are also accepted and appreciated. Visit [www.musikids.com](http://www.musikids.com) for dropoff locations and hours (at musiKids® studios) or contact Clearing House to arrange collection ([jackie@clearinghousenow.com](mailto:jackie@clearinghousenow.com)).

### **A Wider Circle – Wish List for Families in Need**

In the last issue of *Clearing House Organizing News*, I wrote about *A Wider Circle*, the Bethesda-based non-profit organization that helps families in need. This season, *A Wider Circle* has received numerous requests from clients for basic needs, and has a wait list of families in need of general furniture and home goods. If you have an opportunity to give this season, please consider donating items in good condition to *A Wider Circle*. Visit [www.awidercircle.org](http://www.awidercircle.org) or call 301-657-1010 to schedule donation pickup or for information on drop-off location and hours. Items requested include: beds and bedding, baby items, dressers, tables and chairs, televisions, couches and living room chairs, new cleaning products, kitchen items, home goods (linens, towels, fans), baskets, and plastic comforter bags.

### **Earn Free Organizing Hours from Clearing House!**

As a thank you for your past and continued efforts at spreading the word about our services, and the benefits of becoming organized, Clearing House will credit you one free hour of hands-on organizing service for each new referral you send to us.\* So continue to spread the word about how you've saved time, money and reduced stress by working with Clearing House, and earn enough hours to maintain your organizing "fix." It's never too soon for an organizing tune-up!

### **New! 10-15% Discount on Pre-paid Organizing Package**

Clearing House now offers pre-paid organizing sessions at a discounted rate. As incentive to realize your organizing goals, receive a 10% discount when you purchase a 15-hour organizing package (equivalent to five 3-hour sessions, perfect for several projects or maintenance). Purchase 25 or more hours and receive a 15% discount. Hourly packages must be pre-paid and be used within 6 months of purchase. (As a reminder, Clearing House accepts all major credit cards, processed through a secure online payment service.) Contact Clearing House for current rates. If you have a project in mind, consider purchasing the pre-paid discount package to help get you started. Clearing House will work with you to schedule time and plan your project to maximize your investment. Aren't you worth it?

### **Happy Holidays!**

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\* The one-hour credit will be applied to a scheduled 3-hour organizing session.



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