



Americans Getting Into the Closet

The Motley Fool

By *Dayana Yochim*

I recently spent a fair chunk of change on a major home renovation. Walls came down, walkways were cut through concrete, and two sets of French doors were installed. Ducts were ripped out, and bold crown molding painted high-gloss white went in. The kitchen sink moved across the room, and new cabinets and countertops were introduced. A brick wall was liberated from 100 years of plaster, and rotted floor planks were replaced and ebonized to a high gloss.

Six weeks, 11 four-digit checks, and 20-plus industrial-sized garbage bags of debris later, all I want to do is spend time in my bedroom closet.

What's wrong with this picture?

Nothing, according to a recent article in *Time*. Storage space has gone from a bifold door-and-dry-wall afterthought to a show-house centerpiece. A developer told the magazine that two-thirds of the new mid-priced houses he builds have walk-in master closets, the average dimensions of which would have been a fine-sized extra bedroom just a generation ago.

In homes across America, the show-and-tell is just like mine. The late Victorian fireplace mantel scored at a salvage yard gets only a passing wave, but the built-in pantry is introduced with great fanfare. We marvel at the ingenious ways my contractor carved storage from an existing HVAC closet by constructing built-in shelves and sunk-in cabinets. Then I usher guests to the renovation's piece de resistance: The walk-in closet.

"Elfa!" I exclaim with Vanna White-like gestures, referring to the metal closet shelving system from The Container Store. It took \$400 and six drywall anchors to transform the tall, rectangular box into a museum-worthy showplace for my shoes, slacks, blouses, jeans, yoga wear, and last year's knit shrugs — all within reach and in plain sight for fast outfit planning.

It is, quite possibly, the best \$400 I ever spent.

Overstocked

My 4-by-6 sanctuary is but a sliver of the big storage shrines that U.S. consumers are creating. Last year, Americans spent more than \$2 billion remodeling their closets. (That's how much NASA spent developing the Hubble.) We're certainly into our "storage solutions." To say we're obsessed with storage isn't necessarily an overstatement. A **Rubbermaid** (NYSE: NWL) organization survey found that the number of women who wanted to organize their closets was greater than the number who wanted to lose weight.



There are more than 2,000 closet-organization companies with snap-lock tubs and label-makers at the ready. The founder of the National Closets Group told *Time* that its members reported \$100 million in revenue last year, up from \$15 million in 1999. And according to the National Association of Real Estate Investment Trusts, self-storage is the leading REIT sector, with a 23.4% gain year to date.

Check out the average American's garage and attic, and you can see that we have a problem parting with stuff. You don't have to leave your desk to get even more stuff — just log on to Craigslist.org. (Here's a handy shopper's guide to this worldwide garage sale).

If you can't bear to part with your Aunt Fannie's Pfaltzgraff dinnerware, at least you don't have to go far to find the right storage materials. Everyday retailers have glommed on to the neatness craze. Have you noticed how much floor space **Target** (NYSE: TGT) devotes to home storage items? Have you been to Ikea? **Linens 'n Things** (NYSE: LIN) carries nearly as many things to help you organize as it does linens. Even **Home Depot** (NYSE: HD) and **Lowe's** (NYSE: LOW) are catering to the DIY closet installers. (Shopping tip: Bring trail mix to keep the energy up so you won't miss any space-saving item.)

You can never be too rich, too thin, or too organized

For many folks, coated wire shelving, plastic bins, and particleboard just won't do. The average custom closet costs from \$3,000 to \$5,000. But why stop there? A CLOSETS magazine survey (yes, closet organizer manufacturers, installers and retailers have their own trade pub) found that 17% said more than a quarter of their storage installations cost \$10,000 or more.

It's not hard to get up to five-figure prices. After all, building your space is not just about finding room for all of your shoes. It's about luxury, presentation, and color coordination. Today's walk-in is better appointed than most five-star hotel loos.

Starter closet kits come in polished chrome. From there, you can upgrade to fine woods (even cedar), glass-front drawers, and storage "islands," which, as in your kitchen, boast a polished granite surface — though the ones in your closet are for folding sweaters, not crepes. Individually lit cubbies showcase Manolos and Louis Vuittons. Drawers are lined in velvet to hold jewels. Chandeliers, love seats, even surround-sound speakers are the stuff of today's luxury dressing room.

Overdone? Not as much as you might think. When it comes to upgrading your abode, think "Resale, Sweet Resale." Just watch people at any open house — they certainly aren't shy about opening closet doors and kitchen drawers. That's why real estate pros advise sellers to clear the clutter — even in the garage — to make the storage accommodations seem more than adequate.



Even if you're not upgrading your closets for resale, a few private luxuries — even inexpensive ones — can put a sparkle in your day. The coral coat hooks I bought on Anthropologie.com (owned by **Urban Outfitters** (NYSE: URBN)) are like jewelry for the inside of my hall closets. It's a happy moment each morning when I open the door to get the dog's leash.

Mental baggage

In the middle of my renovation, I woke up one night from a nightmare in which I was unpacking all of my belongings in the new place: Where was the Swiffer going to go? The stepladder can't stay out in plain sight! What about my toolbox and the two plastic bins labeled "hardware/lightbulbs" and "glue products"? And the winter coats!

The next morning, I called my contractor, and we plotted two additional closets to fill the dead space in the corners of my entryway ("change order" check No. 628). One has four shelves for cleaning supplies, dog stuff, hardware, tools, and file boxes. The other has room for winter coats, the stepladder, and the Swiffer.

There was, evidently, another way to go — a storage solution suggested on our Get Organized! discussion board: "I solved the problem of not having a place for everything in my closet the old-fashioned way: By getting rid of stuff."

As for me, well, let's just say that when I decide to sell my place, the listing will say "closet system not included." Elfa is coming with me.

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