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Do we really need more 'stuff'?

By Michael Bass
UCF Forum columnist
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Since most people are busy acquiring more and more things, it may be past time to start thinking about the question: Do we really need more “stuff”? However, it can’t be too late if “stuff” is defined properly.

The word “stuff” in the context of this column is meant to describe all the things we have that we feel the urge to have more of, or are convinced we must upgrade to the next better version.

Let’s start by thinking a bit about something as simple as a T-shirt. On average everyone in the world wears out one T-shirt per year. This means about 7 billion T-shirts have to be manufactured each year just to meet the demand for replacements.

There are about 30 million seconds in a year. As a result, there have to be factories spewing out 233 T-shirts per second working nonstop all year long. Plus, many people want more than one T-shirt, so you can see that the worldwide economy must produce a great many T-shirts per year. It also must dispose of the worn out, torn or stained T-shirts.

The T-shirt example is just one that shows how our demand for “stuff” impacts our society and the world around us. It means we have to grow, harvest and process cotton into thread. Then we have to knit it into cloth and sew it into T-shirts for distribution around the world. Then we must gather up the worn out T-shirts and find a use for the remaining material or put it in a garbage dump. Our demand for this one single product significantly impacts our culture. It determines how we organize ourselves to grow the raw material, make and use the product, and finally, how we dispose of it.

Don't get me wrong, I believe that changing certain things is for the better and is definitely important. If I were to still be driving the first car I ever owned, I would be driving – by today's standards – a death trap. That car had no seat belts, no air bags, no dashboard padding, pointy dashboard knobs, bias ply tires and no crumple-zone construction. Of course, all cars in those years were like that.

Sometimes change is for the better. Today the change to hands-free, Bluetooth connection for your mobile phone in your car seems a luxury when it actually minimizes the risk you take when you feel you must use your phone in your car.

Then there is the “stuff” that is just for fun.

I can't deny that I have an iPad. I bought it by rationalizing that it would be useful taking notes in meetings and keeping my calendar. It turns out that most of its use is in checking on the weather, reading the news, carrying the books I am reading and, when I am making long trips, watching movies.

My early version of an iPad is quite adequate for my uses. The more recent versions have a higher-resolution screen that is unnecessary for so small a screen as on an iPad. In addition, the newer iPads may have a better camera. If I want to take a photo, I can use my camera or my mobile phone. More “stuff” that I have – mea culpa.

That leads me to mobile phones. At first they were large, heavy, expensive, analog devices. After they became smaller, less-expensive digital devices, someone realized that a digital mobile phone could substitute for a personal assistant. It could provide the user with access to such things as calendar schedules and appointments, email messages, weather data, stock market quotes, banking transactions, Facebook, Google and Twitter just to name a few. It could even allow the user to play games when needing an escape or while in a boring class or meeting.

Today, mobile phones/personal assistants vie with one another over such features as camera resolution, screen size and how thin they might be. The buyer is encouraged to change or upgrade for such features as these. In the meanwhile, the buyer is being encouraged to buy more “stuff” when he or she already has a perfectly usable device. The existing device can be traded-in, sold or trashed. But it becomes just more to add to the pile of “stuff” we are creating.

When next you are browsing the internet for something you want to buy or visiting a big box or department store, keep in mind that almost everything that is for sale today will be in a second-hand store, set out in a garage sale or in a garbage dump in less than three years. The lifetime of most “stuff” is that short.

So, when it comes to more “stuff,” sometimes it benefits you for a time, sometimes it benefits everyone because it provides a critically important improvement and sometimes it is just more for the trash heap.

Your choices determine which. Choose wisely.

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