Working Through April Lane Benson’s
To Buy or Not to Buy

By Andrea Sharb

In 2009, I reviewed a book called *I Shop Therefore I Am*, compiled by April Lane Benson, Ph.D. Because I greatly appreciated that book, I was anxious to read and review her latest book, *To Buy or Not to Buy*, an “interactive guidebook for that transformation” from overshopper to shopper.

I have been working with an overshopper, “Amy,” since June 2009. Amy is in her mid-40s and is a very creative high school art teacher who’s struggled with overspending since college. She was widowed in 2008 and has two teenage children. She was diagnosed with ADHD in late 2009. Her home was a Level III on the Clutter Hoarding Scale when we began working together.

Coaching the Change

Though Amy has done an amazing job of clearing the clutter from her home, she realized that without controlling her spending and the flow of goods into her home, she’d never achieve her goals of a presentable home, financial security, and being comfortable with her “new normal” of being a single mom supporting two kids.

When I introduced her to the book *To Buy Or Not To Buy* in January 2010, she was intrigued but overwhelmed by the thought of working through it on her own. As her organizer coach, I offered to coach her through it. In the book, Benson encourages the shopper to enlist the support of a “Shopping Support Buddy,” the requirements for which she outlines in great detail, but who is essentially an advocate for the individual working her way through the program. Amy has graciously allowed me to document our journey through this book so that I could share it with you.

Amy started reading *To Buy or Not to Buy*, page 7

Why They Buy and How We Can Help

By April Welch, CPO®

A few years ago, I realized one of my weekly clients was outspending what we could declutter. Her words (“I don’t want to live like this anymore”) didn’t match her actions; in the background was the ever-present cha-ching, cha-ching, cha-ching.

In an attempt to understand this frustration, and to figure out how I could be more helpful as her professional organizer, I began my own research. Obviously, turning to the client and asking her to psychoanalyze her behavior wasn’t going to provide any insight. So, instead, I turned to the marketing industry itself.

Reading the following books provided the starting point for my research and subsequent strategies that have helped my clients become more educated and aware consumers.

- *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* and *Call of the Mall* by Paco Underhill
- *Why People Buy Things They Don’t Need* by Pamela Danziger

See *Why They Buy*, page 3

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NSGCD
NATIONAL STUDY GROUP ON CHRONIC DISORGANIZATION
Our mission is to benefit people affected by chronic disorganization. The NSGCD explores, develops, and communicates information, organizing techniques, and solutions to professional organizers, related professionals, and the public.
Why They Buy from page 1

- *Buy-ology* by Martin Lindstrom

Underhill's and Lindstrom's books provided the most concrete insights. Danziger's book is not for the weak: I found myself recognizing how marketers are taught to “key” in on the weakness of our more severe clientele and felt physically nauseated during certain parts of the book. However, I was able to turn her insights into knowledge for my chronic acquiring (or CA) clientele.

From a professional organizing perspective, chronic acquiring seems to fill the void of connection the client desperately needs but doesn’t have a quality or healthy way of finding for herself. Look at how many clients are unable to answer, “What do you do for yourself?” “What’s your hobby?” “What’s your passion?” Often, finding a happy place revolves around shopping euphoria.

If your CA client is shopping to fill the void of connection, is he experiencing the “Cheers Effect”? Do the cashiers know his name? Does he frequent yard sales and strike up long conversations? Is he extremely fond of the paperboy (contributing to an over-abundance of newspapers that are hard to get rid of because of an emotional connection to the delivery)?

Lindstrom believes, “We’re all searching for stability and familiarity, [and] product rituals give the illusion of comfort and control.” So consider, what if QVC is less about the “stuff” and more about the ritual or habit? Is QVC the CA client’s bottle of liquor or pack of smokes? Does the person form a relationship with the customer service staff? Feel as though the celebrity is speaking directly to her?

According to Underhill, “People enjoy shopping in places where they feel wanted and needed and loved, even people without much money.” I would add to that, “… and no matter the resistance surrounding such choices.”

The checkout line itself offers the opportunity for connection during busy times: Strangers are openly sharing the experience, allowing the compulsive acquirer to feel connected to someone who won’t judge his purchasing habits.

For our fast food CA clients, we may see the “Super-Size Me” effect. The simple question, “Would you like me to super-size that for you?” may be received as a gesture of nurturing rather than the up-sell it really is. Communicate this to your clients so they can avoid making those emotionally based decisions.

So, what can our clients do?

We know of the “drive-by shopping” some veterans use with clients: All in separate sessions, visit the road the store is on, visit the parking lot of the store, walk to the doors of the store together, enter the store together, actually make it to the return counter together.

But what’s a client to do when she’s on her own?

- Recognize the Decompression Zone: In the first 10–15 feet of a store there is a slowed walking pace, a change of lighting, and, to the right, the first impulse purchase challenge. About 75% of shoppers who grab a basket make a purchase.
- Use a favorite store to have a “wallet-free” experience.
- Help clients recognize there are zones in stores based on purpose, and help them understand the purpose of their purchase.
- If kids are part of the impulse purchases, suggest that a babysitter may be less expensive than the end result of shopping with the tykes.
- Men connect with their “caveman” instincts (i.e., family provider) when shopping, so consider how to break this down for a family that has a male CA.
- Shopping is about a deeper connection. Where is the client finding a connection without his wallet — through hobbies, friends, activities driven by passion?
- What lifestyle or fantasies is the person living out with her purchases? Is she buying a “better” spouse, self, parent, cook, house, environment, life?
- Use a dream board focused on the experience of goals rather than things acquired to shift shopping habits.
- We all long for luxuries in some area: wine, cooking utensils, books, shoes, and so on. Help the client identify what his area is and then set boundaries.

One of the most successful strategies I teach clients is to ask the following questions:

- “Does this item deserve to live in my home?”
- “Where will the item live once it enters my home?”

I believe that acquiring comes from the core need to connect; whether through existence (the conversation with the customer service agent) or recognition through the item (labels or image), we are all in search of belonging.

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It's a dilemma every parent faces: How do you manage a household with kids and motivate them to help clean up? Sandra Felton attacks this situation head-on in Neat Mom, Messie Kids. She addresses both neat moms with “messie” kids and messie moms who want to be a better example.

Felton’s technique centers on teaching parents to “become the coach of a family organizing team” with a team goal “to create a house that nurtures and supports each member of the family.” The book is split into three parts, which correspond to three mindsets that homemakers use to create and maintain an organized house.

Readers follow frustrated mother “Rosalie” on her journey from chaos to calm. Any struggling parent would find this book useful. It would also benefit organizers working with parents of young children to get at core issues and devise long-lasting solutions.

Part One, “An Orderly Home Without Effort,” sounds like a promise too good to be true. Felton tells us straightaway that this isn’t just a book about housekeeping, but is about raising your kids to be successful adults. That process begins by teaching them the skill of organizing their spaces. Enter the concept of the family team with Mom (or Dad) as the leader.

The first mindset is the visionary, who forms a vision of her ideal environment. Felton is careful to note that “getting it right doesn’t mean that the house is perfect.” The second mindset, the manager, is one of order and practicality. In the third mindset, the worker does the tasks.

Stressed parents often let the worker take over so that immediate needs are met. However, leaving out the visionary and manager causes issues in the long run. Readers learn to set goals in the visionary mindset and that working together is smarter, not harder.

Part Two, “Put On Your Manager Hat,” details the characteristics of a successful manager. Felton wraps the manager concept into one role and highlights the impact of Mom’s outlook. Sometimes mothers have underlying attitudes — like thinking housework is a waste of a child’s time — that interfere with being effective managers. Or perhaps they “find it easier to do it themselves than to teach it.”

A good manager is able to communicate clearly and calmly, knows the value of a strong bond, and consistently assigns tasks and fair consequences. The section on verbalizing agreements and establishing consequences provides specific and realistic examples to coach moms on handling younger kids.

Felton’s “Three Steps to Order” are to Simplify, Sort, and Store. As a way to get ahead of the clutter, simplifying comes first. She offers two different approaches for decluttering: the Mount Vernon Method, based on how George Washington’s home is cleaned, and the Mt. Vesuvius Method for bigger projects. These two concepts are definitely useful to have in an organizer’s bag of tricks.

Once a home has been decluttered and organized, the family needs to come together to maintain it. Felton has three rules to help change living habits. First, “honor the sanctity of the family areas and your bedroom.” Next is to follow the camper’s rule of leaving the area the same as or better than you found it. Finally, jobs that take 30 seconds or less should be done right away.

In Part Three, “A New View of Housekeeping,” readers see how Rosalie incorporates her worker personality with the preceding mindsets of visionary and manager after visiting the home of model housekeeper “Lenore.” Felton analyzes why Rosalie was able to make a successful transition, namely, that she changed her attitude and developed a more complete view of her role as mother.

The book ends with six appendices. My favorite is “Helpful Letters From Moms in the Trenches” because it reinforces the lessons that Felton teaches in the book and supplies a few new ideas. Another useful section is the list of age-appropriate jobs. This can be valuable for an organizer giving a presentation to mothers of young kids who aren’t sure how or when to begin household teamwork.

The book and website suggestions, chore chart ideas, and a sample family contract are great resources for families who want to change the “modus operandi” in their house. In all, Felton presents a comprehensive guide to parents who want to bring harmony to their family through teamwork and good household management.

Book reviewer Kate Varness owns Green Light Organizing in Peoria, IL, and can be reached at kate@greenlightorganizing.com.
The Organizer’s Tool Kit

Battling Overshopping

By Jennie Delancy

“Wow, those shoes are so appealing. I need a pair to accentuate my new suit.” The buyer might even rationalize this by thinking that the purchase is his contribution to reversing the current economic recession. His mind chatters again: “These shoes are just too fine to resist. Surely it won’t hurt to purchase one more pair.”

You might assume that these words were extracted from the script of “Confessions of a Shopaholic,” but in reality, they are pervasive thoughts for those who deal with frequent urges to shop, even for items that may not be essential. Society tends to add comedic connotation to the shopper’s quandary, but it is an epidemic that deserves awareness if we are to change behaviors.

Overconsumption and the accumulation of material goods have shaped Western culture and have become an epidemic in the American lifestyle. The issue transcends racial, income, and even gender barriers. The notion of needing more and better things saturates our media outlets and is relentlessly programmed into our minds by advertisers.

As professional organizers, we witness time and again that clients we help can gain perspective. We’ve even convincingly cajoled them into donating some of their prized items, perhaps just to see those things return in other forms. It is our obligation and professional duty to assist our clients with the delicate dilemma of not replacing donated items with even more “stuff.”

While it can be easy to shift the lack of control regarding overconsumption to our clients, even the most seasoned gurus of the organizing industry can be prone to overspending habits.

In identifying our own vulnerabilities, we are able to empathically relate to our clients and gently guide them to reform their actions regarding undesirable behavior patterns. A non-judgmental attitude is helpful in this process and is necessary to foster the understanding that facilitates authentic change.

Dr. April Lane Benson, Ph.D., is the nation’s leading expert in working with compulsive shoppers and is the author of To Buy or Not to Buy, a self-help book for those seeking to avoid the snares of shopping compulsion.

The book takes the reader on an interactive journey, with various exercises designed to pinpoint the root causes of the addiction. These exercises include journaling, understanding marketing strategies and consumerism, and, my favorite, developing tailor-made alternatives that can be used to substitute the urge to shop.

Additionally, Benson has developed a more abridged version of the workbook format, called the “Three Proven Strategies for Stopping Overshopping” (www.stoppingovershopping.com), that can be implemented immediately.

1. Identify your triggering emotions.

Shopping is an equal opportunity, all-purpose mood changer. “While there are as many reasons to overshop as there are overshoppers, the desire to change your mood is one of the most common. Anger, sadness, loneliness, boredom, and excitement, to cite only a few emotions, can all lead to a shopping binge.”

2. Discover your authentic needs.

You can never get enough of what you really need. “Though it may offer temporary relief, overspending cannot create enduring change in the feelings that underlie it. No physical goods can truly fulfill emotional needs. Happiness, despite the promise of the ads and the powerful pull of our consumer culture, cannot be the next purchase away. … Do you really need that sixth pair of black pants or the newest digital camera or whatever it is you think will bring inner satisfaction?”

3. Instead of shopping, create tailor-made alternatives.

These alternatives are an important strategy for eliminating overspending, a defense for when the urge is strong. “A tailor-made alternative is an activity you prepare ahead of time to do instead of shopping, an activity carefully chosen to address your authentic needs. Do something instead of shopping and you’ll probably find that the urge has dissipated; every time you do this, you’ll reinforce your power to resist subsequent urges.”

The Three Proven Strategies delineated above provide a snapshot of the process. Visit Benson’s website for a more comprehensive understanding of the program.

Those wishing to overcome this pervasive addiction must be realistic regarding behavior modification. As Benson points out: “These strategies may appear simple on the surface, but each is a powerful new way of addressing your overspending problem. Be patient with yourself, congratulate yourself for every step in the right direction, and above all, resist any tendency to judge yourself for the inevitable occasional step backward.”

Professional organizers offer myriad techniques and services that can assist clients; being mindful about a client’s habits is a critical element of effectively working with and helping an individual overcome the challenges of overspending. However, we must also be attuned to larger challenges at work in a client’s life: If, for example, a client displays continued and persistent challenges with over-shopping or hoarding, it is necessary to refer him or her to a therapist specializing in treating the disorder. Therapeutic intervention is often the preferred and recommended route to

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from page 5

overcoming compulsivity tendencies.

There is abundant opportunity in life for all of us to establish meaningful relationships and purpose. Those needs may not be always met with the purchase of some item. Many things lead to meaning and fulfillment: gratitude for what we have, kind words we might offer one another, keeping our word to those who matter to us. No tangible item can substitute for the intangible gifts (gratitude, contentment, love and peace) that our spirits so inherently require to thrive.

Contributing Editor Jennie Delaney owns NorthStar Transformation Firm, LLC. You can reach her at NorthStarTransformation@gmail.com.

Sources:
• www.stopovershopping.com
• To Buy or Not To Buy, Dr. April Benson

Kathy Gulli. “Are the fit tidier? Many pack rats are overweight.” Macleans.ca. June 14, 2010. Inspired by watching compulsive hoarders on television, many of whom were overweight, a recent study examined the relationship between physical activity levels and the condition of participants’ homes and streets. Findings suggest that a person’s level of exercise was related not to how conducive the neighborhood was to getting exercise, but rather to whether or not a person’s house was in good shape. www2.macleans.ca/2010/06/14/are-the-fit-tidier

Heather Peters. “Professionals distinguish between chronically disorganized and hoarders.” Knoxnews, Knoxville, TN. Feb. 28, 2010. A Knoxville area CPO-CD aims to raise awareness around what distinguishes chronic disorganization from compulsive hoarding. The article refers readers to the NSGCD website, and NSGCD subscriber Mary Pankiewicz offers advice for individuals seeking help and the professionals helping them: “The hardest part of the project is recognizing the problem and picking up the phone for help. Then, the best approach is cooperative therapy between the hoarder, a counselor, a professional organizer and often a family member or friend.” www.knoxnews.com/news/2010/feb/28/professionals-distinguish-between-chronically-diso
Certificate Graduates

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Certificate of Study in Chronic Disorganization
Lilielle Bucks
Debbie Collier
Lita Daniel
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*Certificate Holders as of June 15, 2010*

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to Buy in February 2010. Our plan:
Read a chapter and get coached on that chapter before moving on to the next.
Her initial goal was to get through one chapter each week.

In chapter one, the reader explores what she is shopping for and documents her explorations in a companion journal. Though not addressed in this chapter, Amy and I took time that first week to create a budget — a tool Amy had never used before. Because she was spending beyond her means, I requested she begin tracking her expenses daily.

**Spending Accountability**

In chapter four, Benson introduces a very powerful tool called the Daily Weigh-In, which builds upon daily tracking of expenses through the introduction of a Necessity Score. My feeling was that Amy could integrate the Necessity Score in coming weeks, but right now she desperately had to get an idea of where her money was going.

At our second session, I was amazed by how much awareness Amy was building around her finances. After her husband died, she had taken a huge step toward financial security by paying off debts and credit cards and beginning to pay cash for everything. Unfortunately, she was finding herself short of cash on a regular basis. As we entered her weekly expenditures into her newly created budget, Amy shared her surprise about the strong impact having accountability around her spending was having on her. Knowing that she would have to record an expense was keeping her from making expenditures she didn’t absolutely have to make.

In our third session, at Amy's request, we shared the newly created family budget with her teenagers. When the teens were asked to estimate how much the household spent annually, they both guessed under $10,000. They were astounded to learn that expenditures were actually ten times that. Amy subsequently shared with me that as a direct result of the budget discussion her 16-year-old daughter took a job and is now paying for many of her own expenses. Amy was thrilled with this unanticipated benefit of the budget conversation.

We completed our third session with Amy sharing with me her responses to the first of the journaling exercises in the book, titled, “Why Do You Overshop?” and “Your Shopping Autobiography.” Amy related to me a number of “ah-ha” moments that had occurred to her as she completed this journaling, her biggest

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Take-away being the realization of just how many years shopping has been an issue for her.

Maintained Awareness

A number of months elapsed between our third and fourth sessions. As we all know, life gets in the way for everyone, but seems to especially get in the way for our chronically disorganized clients. When I met with Amy in May 2010, she was looking forward to beginning our work again, and we scheduled weekly sessions for the remainder of the summer.

Amy shared with me that even though we had not actively coached around To Buy or Not to Buy for a few months, she was still maintaining awareness around her spending and as a result was definitely making fewer purchases. She was also noticing that when there was no accountability (in the form of documenting all of her expenditures), it was much too easy for her to lose track of her discretionary spending.

At our fifth session, we explored chapter two and the ideas of “triggers and aftershocks, values and vision.” I was especially impressed with two sections in this chapter. In the first, “Values and Vision,” Benson provides a wonderful acknowledgement to the reader for getting this far and then encourages the reader to explore whether or not this journey is really worth the effort. So many self-help books assume you’re “all in” right from the beginning. Benson wants to keep checking in with you. This is demonstrated again in the section, “To Stop or Not to Stop,” which explores ambivalence around stopping shopping.

‘Vision and Determination’

Though we are not yet to chapter five, I appreciated Benson’s list of “Acts of Self Kindness” that can replace shopping and her focus in this chapter on “Self-Kindness, Self-Care, and Self-Respect.” On her own, Amy is already identifying healthier activities that she would like to try instead of shopping, and those choices will be further reinforced when we get to this chapter.

I also appreciated Benson’s statement to readers from chapter seven, titled “Mindful Shopping”: “Your challenge is to stay emotionally centered and mindful — of what you plan to buy; of what you can comfortably afford to spend; of what you’re responding to [when you shop]; and, above all, of who you are and what really matters to you.” I thought this nicely summed up what the book helps the reader to accomplish.

Amy and I are far from completing the 10-chapter book, but she has committed to working through this book with me, and I am confident that over the course of the coming months her awareness will continue to be raised through her reading, our coaching sessions, and the numerous journaling and shopping related exercises she’ll complete.

Amy is determined to work through at least one chapter every couple of weeks. She shared with me that she now realizes that it “takes a lot of vision and determination to stay with [a program such as this].” Amy also shared with me that if she had realized initially how long it might take to get control of her overspending, she might never have started the process. At this point, though, she appears to be invested in the process, and I expect that she will succeed in achieving her goals.

Though I believe that therapy is probably the most direct method for dealing with overspending, using To Buy Or Not To Buy and the companion journal has the potential to help a lot of people who may not initially be comfortable with the idea of therapy. If the overshopper is able to make significant progress on her own, fantastic. If not, then hopefully she’ll at least build enough awareness on her own that she will be willing to try the therapy route.

Contributor Andrea Sharb is based in Avon Lake, OH, and owns S.O.S./Sharb Organizing Solutions. You can reach her at agsharb@mac.com.

New Subscribers

Welcome to our newest subscribers. The NSGCD now has more than 424 subscribers.

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(New subscribers as of June 30, 2010)
Teleclass News

Regular Teleclass Night for 3rd Quarter is Wednesday night.

Standard or Regular Teleclasses
Date: Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2010
Time: 8 p.m. Eastern
Topic: Listening + NEW
Presenter: Lisa Orick-Martinez

Date: Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2010
Time: 8 p.m. Eastern
Topic: The Revised Clutter Hoarding Scale NEW
Presenter: Sheila Delson, CPO-CD

Date: Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2010
Time: 8 p.m. Eastern
Topic: Effective Communication Skills for Working With Students With ADHD NEW
Presenter: Jennifer McDaniel Wolfe, CPO-CD

Date: Wednesday, Sept. 1, 2010
Time: 8 p.m. Eastern
Topic: Advanced Hoarding REQUIRED
Presenter: Mindy Godding, CPO-CD

Date: Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2010
Time: 8 p.m. Eastern
Topic: Should I Report This or Not? What Every Professional Organizer Needs to Know About Abuse, Neglect, and Other Potential Harms in the CD Household NEW
Presenter: Tiffany deSilva

Date: Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2010
Time: 8 p.m. Eastern
Topic: Bipolar Session I NEW
Presenter: Julie Fast

Newsletter submissions are due on the 15th of February, April, June, August, October & December to editor@nsgcd.org.

Challenging Client
By Eve D’Onofrio

You have a consultation at the home of a woman named Iris. Iris reveals that she has vertigo, “emotional issues,” and believes she is a hoarder, though her house looks quite clean and roomy. You make suggestions to her based on her stated goals, and she seems satisfied with your recommendations.

You don’t hear from Iris for more than two weeks, despite leaving several voicemails and e-mails. Iris finally calls and explains that she felt you were “controlling [her]” and “telling [her] what to do.” You explain that you were only attempting to offer helpful suggestions. Iris apologizes, sharing that your appointment reminded her of her “controlling ex-husband and son,” and tells you she will “do most of the sorting and purging [her]self with some friends,” and then call you to assist her with the “emotional items.”

Iris remains in contact with you, but continually postpones your scheduled appointments. She keeps saying she wants to work with you, yet can’t seem to commit to a specific time. You enjoy Iris but recently you had to gently tell her that one of your phone conversations was developing into a coaching session, so she agreed to end the call.

What would you do?

Kate Varness would pay attention to the NSGCD’s Readiness of Change Fact Sheet. “Iris shows ‘reaching out,’ as Phase 3 of that Fact Sheet describes, but her commitment level hasn’t made it all the way to action.” Varness would:
• “Ask Iris questions that get at her ambivalence. Iris could identify the pros and cons of making the change she suggested or of not making any changes.
• “Create a firm boundary on our phone conversations or the number of times I would accept a postponed session.
• “Tread carefully. The accusation of being controlling sends up a red flag.
• “Leave a paper or e-mail trail to avoid any confusion and allow her to process information at her own pace.

Contributing Editor Eve D’Onofrio owns Organized Tranquility and lives in Campbell, CA. She can be reached at eve@organizedtranquility.com.