



## Downsizing calls for tough decisions

### Smart design, technology can ease the transition to smaller space

By Rachel Koning Beals

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**CHICAGO (MarketWatch) -- For some, downsizing to a smaller home is a health or financial necessity. Others, empty nesters and retirees among them, are simply going after an easier lifestyle, no longer willing to be tethered to a high-maintenance house and life's many accumulations.**

Smart decisions with design and technology, and some brutal honesty at the outset, can make this sometimes painful and often freeing process a bit easier, the experts say. When building new or contemplating a smaller existing home, "it's not about square footage, but where that footage is that's important. Think about how you live, entertain and interact with your family, the mix of formal and informal spaces," says Amanda Strauss, an interior designer in Manhattan and Connecticut. "Why do you need a gourmet kitchen if you barely boil water? Maybe what you need is a fabulous cappuccino bar and a kitchen just big enough so that two people can clean up in there at holiday time."

Strauss helps clients make the most of their rooms, which can mean making a rarely used formal dining room do double and even triple duty as an office or a playroom for occasional visits from grandchildren. Traditional dining room furniture for dish storage and serving, such as cupboards or buffets, are often of compatible height to be made into a bill-paying station or a laptop-computer surface with a few simple modifications, Strauss says. "Don't be afraid to break up furniture sets, which are so old and passé. And one of the deadest things on earth is the china cabinet. If you have to keep it, reconsider it for use as a bookcase," she says. She finds some homeowners caught in the trappings of wanting to keep large Oriental rugs, which in many cases don't retain much investment value and instead offer little utility or versatility in a new, smaller space.

#### **Paring possessions**

Before attempting to move the old home's possessions, carefully measure each room in the new place. In a smaller space, window and alcove placement takes on even greater importance for homeowners trying to get the best fit for furniture -- and for deciding what can stay and what must go. Measure wall space and shelving surfaces for art and collections and bring items that will have a place. Take it a step further with inexpensive software, such as Home Design Quick & Easy, or even graph paper, and draw up a plan before the move.

Moving furniture and art is never an easy feat. But usually it's the little things, though big by sheer volume, that pose the biggest challenge: papers, books, CDs, DVDs, dishes and clothes, says Laura Leist, owner of Seattle-based residential and business organizing firm Eliminate Chaos, and author of a book by the same name. "You just have to be realistic. How can 7,000 square feet of possessions fit into 2,000 square feet? It'll be much easier to deal with it now, however," Leist said. "Don't rent a storage facility, unless it's only for a very short time, only if you need a space to store things just until you can move them in."

Homeowners must imagine their new lifestyle, perhaps one that features much less cooking and so little need for so many kitchen items. Leist's client, 83-year-old Margery Abinati, says she found wedding presents never used during her efforts to downsize and organize the kitchen in her long-time family home in La Jolla, Calif. Abinati's aim was to make more efficient use of just a few rooms in the large home, in anticipation of an eventual move to a retirement or assisted-living community.

In fact, many a family home may still be the storage facility for grown children's possessions. Organization experts say these items should go first and suggest parents set a reasonable but firm deadline for removal by family members before then considering those items part of the toss or donate pile.

You can inquire about interest from others in some of the furniture and other items that won't be making the move, Leist says, but she advises those who are downsizing to be sensitive to the fact they may be just transferring the accumulation. In other words, don't force family and friends to take your cast-offs. Purging a home of its personality and memories can be emotional to say the least. But donation can be a rewarding alternative.

Traditional charities such as Goodwill or the Salvation Army are good places to start and may even offer pick-up services for bigger items, in larger cities. Organizational experts say there may be more gratification in knowing where your possessions are going. Ask churches and local community centers about their needs and contact the Red Cross or other relief organizations for tips on families who may have lost whole households to fire or flood or for in-need families hoping to establish a household. For those items destined for the junk pile, check with municipal officials or your garbage company for special dates to pick up large and awkward possessions.

### **Space-saving technology**

Designers insist that compromised space doesn't have to mean a compromised lifestyle.

Leist advises her clients to make furniture work overtime in smaller spaces. New lines emerge all the time in a range of prices that feature cubes and ottomans doubling as tables and storage, and beds with built-in storage. She also recommends checking out whole furniture lines built with condo or apartment scale in mind.

Years of paperwork can be scanned and saved with what are now relatively inexpensive and fast scanners. Just don't forget to back up your files, she says. Digital recording and storage devices are also making CDs and DVDs obsolete. Your move may mark the perfect time to bump up your technology choices.

Advances in the functionality and look of televisions, sound systems and computers are more than ever allowing for an easier mix between sleek new, space-saving electronics and the other furniture and possessions that a downsizing individual or couple is bringing to their new residence. Philips Home and Style designer Stephen Saint-Onge says he's seen huge strides in technology comfort among mature homeowners in just the past few years. This is helped in part by industry design choices that afford both style and cutting-edge performance, which appeals to both genders and cuts across generations, he says.

Saint-Onge recalls the all-too-familiar challenge of fitting large-screen televisions and multipart stereos into the homes of his own clients and those of the homeowners he was surprising with a makeover on The Learning Channel's "While You Were Out" program. Saint-Onge now helps electronics manufacturer Philips keep room scale and esthetics in mind with its latest offerings.

"Technology is no longer an afterthought, but is often factored into an initial design budget," he says. Televisions are no longer being housed in bulky armoires that can dictate a room's arrangement, but are in fact, part of a room's overall scheme, "a work of art in and of itself," he says.

A favorite of his is Philips' Ambilight FlatTV. It comes in 32- to 50-inch options, retailing for between \$1,299 and \$2,299. When not watching television, a customized photo slideshow or a favorite still can be displayed.

Space-saving comes in the smaller tech offerings as well: flat-panel monitors, wireless music centers and wall-mount speakers, universal remote controls and one of Saint-Onge's design picks: the \$199.99 Digital Photo Display, which rolls through 50 downloadable images, using one frame to show the smiling mugs of kids and pets and not the several frames scattered throughout a room.