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Tame your paper monster

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Paper spreads in our homes like a plague, taking over desktops, tables and drawers.

But we have a strong incentive to fight it. Reducing paper waste and clutter can save us more time than practically any other "green" activity. Follow these tips to break free from the paper beast.

File, don't pile

With fewer social activities and a new year ahead, January and February are prime times to get a handle on your home paperwork by sorting and strategizing. Most organizational experts agree the best way to reduce clutter and save time is to handle paper only once. This means being realistic about what you will read "some day" or need to save. If information is easily accessible online, don't keep a paper copy.

Place a small recycling basket or bin next to where you sort the mail, and recycle unneeded mail immediately rather than letting it pile up.

It doesn't matter how basic or idiosyncratic your filing system is, as long as you have one. Folders, large reused envelopes, boxes or three-ring binders can all fit the bill for storage. Organizing your files by related subjects usually works better than alphabetized systems.

If you and a spouse or partner can't agree on the best way to file documents, use separate methods. For example, one person can keep track of house files, and the other can handle kid-related files.

Stop junk mail

Over a lifetime, the average American spends *eight months* opening bulk mail, according to the Center for a New American Dream, a Maryland-based nonprofit. Reducing trumps recycling, so take these steps to stem the tide of unwanted mail:

- **Sign up for the Mail Preference Service**, operated by the Direct Marketing Association (DMA), a trade group for the direct-mail industry. DMA had been charging \$1 for this "opt-out" service, but this month they eliminated that fee for online registrations. However, they still require you to provide a credit-card number for verification.

- **Register with Catalog Choice**, the free opt-out service started last year by the Ecology Center, a California-based nonprofit endorsed by several major environmental organizations. More than 360,000 consumers have signed up so far. This got the attention of DMA, which wants to control opt-outs itself. In addition to removing its \$1 fee and making other changes in its own service, DMA has urged catalog companies to ignore the Catalog Choice requests. But sign up for Catalog Choice anyway. Even if some mailers don't honor it, you still send this message to the U.S. direct mail industry, which disgorge 19 billion catalogs a year: You demand the right to opt out on your terms, not DMAs.

- **Get off credit-card solicitation lists** through a free service provided by the credit industry. This one also has a slight catch: They ask for your Social Security number (to confirm the request, they say), which makes some people nervous. Since the credit-reporting companies already have your number, it's not a big risk, and this service has proved effective.

Steer clear of junk-mail reduction services that charge fees, which may range from \$15 to \$50. Also avoid opt-out services, even free ones, that do not state on their Web site who operates the service or where they are located.

Sorry, wrong number

More than 15,000 tons of phone books are distributed in Washington state annually. Many Seattle-area residents receive three or more a year. Although currently it is nearly impossible to opt out from getting these phone books, several government agencies across the nation are working with the phone-book industry to make opt-outs easier for consumers. Local governments involved in this project include King County, Seattle, Snohomish County and Kitsap County.

You can put phone books in with your paper recycling, but not receiving them if you don't want them would conserve resources and reduce clutter much more efficiently.

Following a national meeting in Seattle in October, the two main phone-book-industry trade groups agreed to encourage member companies to set up opt-out programs. In the meantime, if you get a phone book you don't want, contact the publisher — such as Dex, Yellow Book or Verizon — so they will realize how many consumers want to eliminate the waste and nuisance of unwanted phone books.

Print with precision

Generate less paper yourself as well. When printing pages from a Web site, use the "print preview"

feature to make sure you don't print unnecessary pages. When writing documents, make the margins smaller to conserve paper. For your next home printer, buy a model with double-sided or "duplex" printing, and cut your paper usage by nearly half.

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