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PAGE 162

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BEST in SHOW

Somewhere amid the clutter of the TV, DVD player, cable box and gaming console lies your family room. Creating a beautiful—and functional—space is easier than you think.

by Sarah Stebbins



command center

TV trolleys on wobbly wheels just don't cut it anymore—hi-def and all your family's media needs call for high-style storage. Modify a vintage armoire or put your flat screen on top of a cool console table. For lots of useful shelves, drawers and cabinets, a d.i.y. system like this one from Ikea (ikea.com) is the ultimate solution. It'll keep everyone plugged in—and save your sanity.

Prop styling: Loren Simons

If your family is like most, it's all media, all the time—TVs, DVDs, MP3s, video games and more. Corraling the many components, remotes and discs can feel like a job unto itself—unless you have a streamlined storage center. “It doesn’t have to be the biggest you can find,” says organizing expert Peter Walsh, author of *Enough Already!: Clearing Mental Clutter to Become the Best You* (Free Press). A unit that holds your core pieces (TV, DVD player, stereo), with a few extra drawers or cubbies, will do. Look for a piece that lets you display some decorative items (this is going in a living area after all). A combination of open and enclosed shelves makes it easy to tune in—and out.

SHELF EXAMINATION

Display personal items, like a collection of pottery, along with picture frames, books, colorful boxes, binders and favorite photo albums. “This adds warmth and helps balance the techiness,” says Los Angeles interior designer Kishani Perera. An open, easy-to-reach shelf is also a good spot for an MP3 player docking station—you can just grab the device and go. If you have a conventional stereo or other equipment you want to keep accessible, Perera suggests putting it in a cubby with books or pretty, rectangular containers arranged on top. “The repetition of boxy shapes is pleasing and helps draw the eye away from the electronics,” she says.



CABINET MEMBERS

“With closed storage, the temptation is to just throw stuff in,” says Walsh. His advice: Decide what you will use the space for and stick to it. A high cupboard is ideal for things you don’t have to access frequently, like board games and family archives—photo albums and boxes, scrapbooks, home movies. But if you start stashing spare batteries and your son’s old action figures in there, it throws off the organization. Go for adjustable shelves, when possible, so you can tailor the space to suit your needs.

See Buyer's Guide, page 167.

GREAT SHAPES

Frosted glass cabinets are a nice option for showcasing collectibles: They allow you to see hints of colors and forms, without making an already busy storage unit feel cluttered. Perera recommends choosing vases or bottles in a range of silhouettes, which will cast cool shadows on the glass. This is also a good way to keep precious items dust-free.



HIDE AND SLEEK

Opt for separate compartments or shelves for things like the DVD player and cable box—if stacked on top of each other, they can overheat. The frosted glass panels, a special feature on this cabinet, conceal the electronics, but your remotes will still work. If you have a lot of something, like video games, consider paring down. “Many people have more stuff than a media center can or should contain,” says Walsh. He suggests establishing “zones,” such as two drawers for Wii games and one for DVDs. “Once those are full, you have to remove a disc before you can add one,” he says. Store cases in a single layer (as opposed to two or three deep) in a shallow drawer, so you can easily scan the titles.





REMOTE CONTROL

Remotes and video game controllers tend to scatter and slip between sofa cushions, so set a basket or fabric box on the coffee table to contain them. Walsh also advises keeping a basket of the five or so most-played games or movies there, so kids won't be constantly digging them out of a drawer (and forgetting to put them back). When there's a new favorite, file one of the old ones in the media center. "The drawer works like a lending library," says Walsh.

MEDIA SAVVY

Expert advice on making an entertainment center work in your home.

CONSIDER SCALE. "One thing I see a lot is a dinky stand with a TV, DVD player and 10 other things teetering on top," says Perera. This looks silly in a large space and can make a tight room feel even more cramped. Perera advises going for a stand or unit with a cubby that's a few inches wider than the TV on both sides and has multiple compartments and cupboards for components. When equipment has room to breathe, the overall look is airy, not "about-to-topple."

ADD PERSONALITY. Perera likes to spruce up plain pieces with decorative knobs or pulls and a coat of paint. (Spray paint works best on wood composites like particleboard.) Her favorite shade is charcoal gray because it looks fresh and blends in with the electronics, causing them to recede. Another designer-approved d.i.y. idea: "Lining the backs of shelves with floral wallpaper or contact paper can look striking," says Perera.

INVOLVE KIDS. Get the whole family to help set up the media center, says Walsh. In particular, talk to children about where their stuff should go and how it should be arranged. This sends the message that you value their things, and it gets them invested in the organization. In other words, "Kids are more likely to put their games away, and mom doesn't lose her mind," says Walsh.

TAME CORDS. It can be maddening to reconnect or swap out equipment if you've got that "spaghetti thing" going on with the cords, says Walsh, who suggests bundling them with cable ties or turtles (rubber shells you wind cords around) to prevent tangles. Then add labels. Try preprinted Kableflags (\$7 for 10, containerstore.com). Or save plastic bread tags, write the names of components on them and slip over cords. Special media cabinets come with back panels designed for a flat screen TV so you don't need to drill holes, and cords can be hidden in the back of the unit.



RAISE THE BAR

It makes sense to store wine and glasses in a high cupboard if the unit is in a room where you like to entertain, especially if you don't have a place in the kitchen or dining room for these items. This wine rack is designed to fit in our cupboard, but a freestanding rack would also work. Our organizing expert is onboard with the idea, so long as you keep the liquor cabinet stuff confined to a shelf or two behind closed doors.