

READER PROBLEM OF THE MONTH:

We use our car like a combination second home and home office, and the clutter is threatening to bury us.

How to go from hell on wheels to a **well-oiled machine**: part office, part snack bar, part homework station, and—yes—part family car.

PICTURE THIS in one Honda minivan: four baseball caps, two soccer balls, a hairbrush, a three-hole punch, vitamins, a headset, a PDA, a laptop, an atlas of the United States, a box of granola bars, three folding chairs, two backpacks filled with sports gear, eight water bottles, two magazines, enough paper to fill a small filing cabinet, about 50 CDs, dozens of books and writing implements, and—depending on the day—two sons, one husband, and two 80-pound Labrador retrievers.

There's a reason the inside of this car looks like a neglected basement. The woman at the wheel, Claudia Lakey, not only runs errands and shuttles her sons to school and soccer but also uses her car as an office, doing paperwork and studying for a master's in teaching. "Some days it feels like my rear never leaves the car," says Lakey, 36, who writes permission slips and thank-you notes while in the car-pool lane. Lakey lives in Memphis with her husband, Joe, and their sons, Ben and Sean, and works part-time for a company that makes nutritional supplements, which explains why informational CDs and bro-

chures quickly fill up any empty space. (If Joe needs a ride, she says, "I excavate the front passenger seat.") To avoid rushing home for a missing soccer cleat or grad-school book, Lakey keeps everything she may need in the car. She's quick to tell you the purpose for each item. "Well, except for the three-hole punch," she says.

Since Lakey isn't getting rid of the stuff anytime soon, the challenge is finding what she needs without digging under the seats. "I'd love a family-friendly system," she says, "so I can get more done while I'm in the car."

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what she likes

- She and the boys can accomplish things while idling or sitting in traffic.
- There's little chance of leaving behind important papers or sports gear.

what she dislikes

- Soccer balls and water bottles constantly roll around underfoot.
- Things often get lost.
- It's hard to gather papers and gear when she wants to bring them indoors.
- There's no way to plug in and charge her laptop and PDA.



the revelation

Claudia Lakey knew it was time to clean up her car's act when it took four months to deal with a bag of rice that had spilled on the backseat floor.

"Vacuuming it up was not the problem, but getting everything else cleaned up so I could get to it was overwhelming," she says. "I knew then that I desperately needed to change the way my car 'works.'"

the ideas

1 | trash bin Leftover breakfasts, snacks, drinks, and other garbage accumulate in a flimsy, often overflowing bag on a door handle or in the backseat. Lakey needs a large, sturdy, conveniently located receptacle that even the dogs can't destroy.

2 | chargers Lakey's car operates as an office on wheels, but it doesn't provide a way to recharge electronic essentials, such as a laptop, a PDA, and a Bluetooth headset. A universal charger kit, kept next to the driver's seat, would do the trick.

3 | movable storage Lakey keeps everything from sports gear to work materials in the car. Easily maneuverable bins will corral similar items in one place—whether they're in the car or stored in the garage.

4 | portable file Since Lakey does paperwork from the driver's seat, she needs her filing system to be on the front passenger seat.

5 | seating assignments Lakey fights a constant battle with clutter. With everything assigned to its particular space, she'll know if anything is out of place and needs to go into the house or be dealt with right away.

front passenger seat: the mobile office



THE PROBLEM: "I try to keep my files in the front seat, but they end up all over the place, and I forget what I need to do. Also, I have a PDA, laptop, and cell phone that I use in the parking lot during soccer practice or while waiting in the car-pool lane. But right now I can charge only my phone."



THE SOLUTION: A compartmentalized container on the front passenger seat holds office supplies, files, and electronics. Lakey uses one file as her in-box. A mat on the dashboard holds her sunglasses, and a collapsible trash bag keeps things tidy. And she can charge her laptop, PDA, and phone at the same time with an adapter kit that has multiple plugs.

backseat: the entertainment center



THE PROBLEM: “The boys need something to keep them occupied in the backseat while I’m driving. Besides toys, they always have a calculator for math drills and an atlas, but everything ends up under the seat. And without a place to keep snacks, I never know when I need to replenish the store.”



THE SOLUTION: A hanging organizer behind the driver’s seat holds the boys’ CDs, calculator, atlas, and school supplies. A removable tray behind the front passenger seat serves as a table for homework or card games. Moving the trash to the front creates room between the boys’ seats for school supplies and a snack container, which can be removed for refilling or cleaning up spills.

trunk area: the locker room



THE PROBLEM: “We have soccer balls, cleats, Tae Kwon Do uniforms—really a little bit of everything—in our trunk area. Without clear spots for it all, it’s hard to know if we’re missing something we need for practice or a game.”



THE SOLUTION: Items once scattered on the floor are contained in compartmentalized systems that make use of vertical space. Collapsible bins hold sports equipment, and each bin has handles so it can go to the garage during the off-season. A clothes hook holds team jerseys for quick changes. There’s even a spot for Lakey’s baseball caps, in case of a bad-hair day.

the gear

Limited space makes it challenging to keep a car tidy. But the right organizing tools allow you to store all the essentials and avoid having to hunt for misplaced items.



CASE LOGIC FRONT-SEAT MOBILE OFFICE, \$35

The Mobile Office provides room for all your road-warrior supplies, including file folders, notebooks, pens, and drinks. It also secures a 15-inch laptop.

TO BUY: www.caselogic.com.



IGO JUICE70 NOTEBOOK ADAPTER PLUS DUAL POWER ACCESSORY, \$130

When combined, these handy devices power both a laptop and a PDA from one outlet. There are cords for wall, car, and airplane outlets.

TO BUY: www.igo.com.



AUTO TRAY TABLE, \$20

Made of plastic and chrome-plated steel, this sturdy surface holds up to 20 pounds. The plastic hooks switch easily from one seat to another, or even to the steering wheel, to hold the desk surface.

TO BUY: www.ajprindle.com.



CASE LOGIC BACKSEAT ORGANIZER, \$10

This organizer attaches to the backseat of most vehicles. The mesh pockets make it easy to see stored items.

TO BUY: www.caselogic.com.



MOUNTAINSMITH MODULAR HAULER 3 SYSTEM DELUXE, \$149

The main compartment holds three removable padded cubes, each with a zippered lid.

TO BUY: www.mountainsmith.com for stores.



QUIK CART, \$35

This plastic crate holds up to 80 pounds, has a pull-up handle and wheels like carry-on luggage, and collapses to a three-inch thickness. With the yellow lid on, it doubles as a seat or a step stool.

TO BUY: www.containerstore.com.

the update

"I definitely feel calmer and more in control now that everything has a place," Lakey says. She notices the difference at every street corner because, she says, "when the car stops, water bottles don't roll around anymore." But the true test came when the boys brought her field-trip permission forms. "I immediately signed them and sent them back," says Lakey. That's back to school, not to the backseat.



do you need help?

Everyone's home has some organizational problem. *Real Simple* would like to hear about yours. Send a brief description of your problem spot, two JPEGs of the area and one of you, and contact information to organize_me@realsimple.com.



Got car clutter?

For more views of this minivan's transformation, go to www.realsimple.com/minivan.