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May we introduce ...

Each month, *LuxeSF* profiles a member of The Luxury Marketing Council. This month we talk with Margaret Fearey Walsh, President and Founder of Changing-Places, the Bay Area's earliest practitioner in the growing field of home organization, which covers the gamut from managing home relocation across the globe, to organizing households for the affluent as well as the average family, seniors or time-deprived. Walsh takes us from her company's humble beginnings 16 years ago to its current peak as industry leader.

LUXESF: Tell us how the company got started.

WALSH: My entree in doing this work came after I opened Rent-A-Wife. We did errands, housekeeping and catering. In the first year of business, one of my clients who "rented" me was a bachelor working for GE Capital. He asked me if I could move him to New York, which I did. I flew to the city, and settled him into his new apartment, putting it all together.

LUXESF: What's the scope of services that the firm provides today?

WALSH: We have two companies to serve our clients. "The Ultimate Organizing Company" is where we organize people's homes and offices. The second business is the "Moving Architect". We pack and sort, unpack and put away, stage, remodel and design homes anywhere in the world.

LUXESF: So, let's take those separately. You said you organize the home. What does that mean?

WALSH: Well, somebody can't fit their car into the garage; they have an office that is cluttered and not working well; or a couple who are moving in together need to sort their belongings so they have more space. We'll come in with a select team and solve the problem and do whatever it takes ... build them storage if need be, help them to keep the best and sell or toss out what they don't need. We generally provide the guidance, support and motivation to get the job done.

LUXESF: Not dissimilar to some of the programs I see on HGTV?

WALSH: Yes, and when we stage a house for sale, we do an instant home make over. Right now I have homeowners who are moving to Palm Springs and want to sell their San Francisco home. We are going through 40 years of memories in that house with my client. We tag what they want to keep, throw away, give away and sell. When that's done, we pack it all up and move it out. Then the stagers who are bringing in furniture, the Realtors, and the contractors can come in to start their work. Changing-Places acts as the project manager to get the house on the market. They trust us implicitly to manage all the elements of what can be a trying and anxiety-ridden experience. We handle everything, all of the details.

LUXESF: In essence, the client gives you the assignment and says, "Get it ready so I can sell it."

WALSH: Yes.

LUXESF: Who are the market segments? What's the need in people's lives that makes them want to use this service?

WALSH: We had a slew of families with small children this year, and a lot of complicated moves. The list includes busy moms with the little kids, somebody who is sick, somebody with a grandparent who is moving in with them, and senior citizens



Margaret Shiland
Fearey Walsh

President

Changing-Places, Inc.

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who are downsizing. We recently handled a downsizing project where our client was moving from a 10,000 square foot home into 1,700 square feet. The first part was that 45% of her possessions were being shipped to Europe, next a lot were sold here and the best were being moved to her new, smaller retirement home in the South Bay Area.

We have single executives who are too busy and can't do it themselves. We just helped a client who had recently relocated to Europe. He called me and said, "I think I made a mistake. I have a horrible moving bid, and I don't know what to do with it. Can you help me?" We jumped in on Friday night. Saturday morning we had an International moving company on the job to give him a much better estimate for the move. Monday morning we started packing. By Tuesday night we were able to hand the keys to the new owners. Everything was done, including repairs on three very fancy cars -- two that we prepped to be sold and one that we shipped to him.

LUXESF: What about corporate relocations? If somebody is moving in from the East Coast, do you do much of that?

WALSH: Yes. We just finished one from Boston, and believe it or not, this year we have had quite a few from Australia.

LUXESF: Let's say for somebody relocating from Australia, what are the primary difficulties associated with the move?

WALSH: The complication, especially with California homes, is that they're much smaller than many other places. A lot of people move here from bigger homes and don't know how to fit everything in.

LUXESF: So, in terms of vendors, you're working with people who build closets, real estate agents, carpenters and handymen, cleaning crews ...

WALSH: Plus picture hangers, moving companies, carpet cleaners, computer and stereo companies, nanny services, baby-proofers, contractors, so much more ...

LUXESF: In a sense you're like a high-end concierge for people who are moving homes. And you also deal with the elderly, do you not?

WALSH: We do a lot of relocation work for elderly people because they're the ones who really need the help. Their moves are usually confusing and difficult for them.

LUXESF: So, they're moving out of a traditional big home into an assisted living facility perhaps or a smaller unit...

WALSH: They don't know where to start. They have 25 or 40 years worth of accumulated belongings and possessions. They don't know whether they should have a garage sale, give everything to an auctioneer or have an estate sale. We have solutions for all of that.

LUXESF: You're very much a confidante and an adviser in a case like that. It's not just a matter of disposal; it's whether or not it should be disposed.

WALSH: We have to look at what they want to keep. Will it fit? Who will take the rest? Should they sell, auction or give to the children? I become their sounding board; we talk about all of the choices and then figure out the best way to approach the issues.

LUXESF: The ideal assignment, or the ideal client for you, would be who?

WALSH: We really love a client who wants to do the job with us, working along side us. Then we can give them a place that is exactly what they really want. But we also do a lot of jobs where they give us the keys, go on vacation, come back and it's all done.

LUXESF: When I moved to the West Coast, it never occurred to me to hire an organizer. We moved to a smaller home, from 3,000 to 1,500 square feet. It never occurred to me that a service such as yours existed. Do you think that's the mainstream point of view?

WALSH: It's big business here in San Francisco because I was the pioneer and seeded

a number of our competitors. After 16 years, I am amazed when people are still surprised and pleased to learn about our services. The general population still isn't aware.

LUXESF: How do you develop your leads?

WALSH: In the beginning, we sent fliers to the Real Estate companies. Next I send out our brochures and update my clients with new and important information by e-mail messages. Lately a lot of our work has come from word-of-mouth and today I am out planting seeds where ever I can find a good lead.

LUXESF: If you had a "Wish List" of lead sources, what would it contain?

WALSH: Everybody can use organizing. With people not moving very much in this down market, the home organizing sector represents a major opportunity.

LUXESF: If you were talking to somebody who was a lead or referral source, you would say to them, "Send me your leads because ..."

WALSH: We make miracles happen. We use psychology, intuition, caring and lots of hard work to make each job go well. We deliver what we promise, on time and in budget. Our team is comprised of competent and reliable people; we complete each job quickly.

LUXESF: What constitutes a very happy customer? How do you know that they're happy?

WALSH: They are usually so giddy you can't miss their excitement.

LUXESF: But what are the emotional cues?

WALSH: Sometimes they cry with joy. We just did a job up in Piedmont and the husband said to his wife, "You know we'd still be in boxes in six months if we did not have this help." They say some really wonderful things at the end of the job.

LUXESF: Do they usually say, "This is perfect. This is exactly the way it should be."?

WALSH: We tell them it will be 95% perfect and the rest we leave for them to add their own taste and feel. They're always surprised and thrilled. And shocked at how much work it was.

LUXESF: This is a service business where a million things can go wrong. Without giving away trade secrets, what are the core elements that make for a successful practitioner in this business?

WALSH: We work with each client differently, according to their emotions and the situation. With so many years in the business, we have seen a lot and that gives us a big head start. Moving is one of the top five stress factors in life -- plus most people don't like change. We put them in charge and make the process as simple as possible.

LUXESF: A lot of detail I assume...

WALSH: Very definitely. We are masters at multi-tasking, organizing and handling lots of things, people and places all at once.

LUXESF: How do you develop your vendor relationships? How do you pick the best ones?

WALSH: I have fine-tuned my vendor list to include only tried and true companies that I have used over the years. Let's take movers: they are local, national and international. Each has its own set of skills, things that they do best. I have to fit the vendors to each client and what their needs are. Some have antiques and others have a lot of things that center on their kids and toys.

LUXESF: When I did my cross-country, our furniture arrived days late. We were never told the reason for the delay but then subsequently learned that that the driver had been jailed mid-trip on an outstanding warrant. In the meantime nobody at company headquarters would tell us what was happening. How do you prevent those things from happening?

WALSH: You want to make sure you get a reliable Master Mover. You also want to have the phone number of the actual driver. I make sure I know the number of the sales person and the president of the company. You have to make sure that you can fix a problem because emergencies do happen.

LUXESF: What's the psychology of the recession doing to your business, if anything?

WALSH: There's less business. Period.

LUXESF: Are there business categories that you would like to develop? Are there new territories that you want to branch into?

WALSH: Well, my dream has always been to do a lot more in Europe. I have a Paris partner and an advisor in the south of France. The current mindset of the Europeans is still one of not seeking help -- not yet. That's changing. Here at home we love doing the cross-country moves because we have teams of people across the states who will handle our clients' every whim. We thrive on complicated moves. We are passionate about what we do and we love the challenge of whatever the next call brings us.

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