

Erma Would Be Proud

In another life, I must have been related to Erma Bombeck, the late American humorist. (Bet you didn't know Erma was part Asian.) How else can I explain the laughter that erupted in the hardware store when I recently shopped with my family for a new toilet? This was not a small chuckle. It was belly-aching, face-contorting, tears flowing laughter. Unlike Erma, who was prone to a bit of exaggeration, I am reporting real names and marketing terms verbatim. Truth is indeed stranger (and funnier) than fiction.

I thought getting a new toilet would be a straightforward process. Pick the color and style, try it out for height, and move on to the checkout. After all, how much is there to know about toilets? A better question would be how much did I *want* to know about toilets?

After passing the "fashion bath" section of the store, where toilets take on an air of elegance for \$800, we got to the aisle with the work horses. (BTW — doesn't it all come out as crap in the end? Okay, that's the most vulgar of the bathroom humor that I will engage in, at least for this article.) Five feet above my head was a row of models on display. I strained to see the differences between each model. I am so used to seeing toilets from above — the rectangular shape of the tank, the curvature of the seat and the bowl underneath — that it's a real change in perspective to see them from below. In this strange land, toilets, not people, are put on a pedestal. Residents of this land bow to the porcelain gods. My husband is equally confused.

What I quickly realize is that there is no trying out these puppies. I'd have to take the manufacturer's word that I am getting my money's worth by picking the elongated bowl instead of a round bowl, that the Ingenium system is better than the regular flushing system, and that Class Five technology really is engineered for "extraordinary bulk flushing performance." I am intrigued by the claim that I will never have to use a plunger again. I thought that happened when I married my husband. My 10-year old son expresses skepticism that the models with Comfort Height will fit him. I agree. One man's comfort is feet-dangling-in-the-air discomfort for a kid.

Clearly, the manufacturers had figured out what customers care about when choosing a toilet—flushing power, comfort, and capacity. What caught my eye was a poster-size picture of a bucket of golf balls on the front of one tank with the claim, "Wow! Over two dozen golf balls in a single flush!" Even Erma could not have come up with that line. Some 55-year old male executive at American Standard must have come up with that, thinking it would impress his golfing buddies. I am not so easily impressed. As a 40-something non-golfing mother, it struck me as something my kids would do for a good prank.

There were other surprises. I wondered who had gotten the dubious task of naming each model. (Can you imagine the marketing meetings at Kohler to come up with new product names?) Some names, like Cadet and Champion and Cimarron, had a heroic bent. I couldn't quite make the connection. Other names spoke of what someone might do while spending time alone — Memoirs and Portrait. Hmm... this was getting a bit personal. Still other names were completely baffling like Plebe-Complete. What did a slang word for a first-year student have to do with a toilet and in what way would he/she be complete? Plebe-Unfinished seemed to be more appropriate. And for the fashionistas, there is the Purist Hatbox, a toilet disguised in the shape of a tall white hatbox. The thought of muddying my

mother's finest seems pretty incongruent with the business at hand. Other names were more understandable: Wellworth and Toilet-to-Go.

My husband and I make our decision: Wellworth, almond color, round bowl, standard height — and move to the checkout aisle. For now, I am happy to leave the world of toilets and go home. Just when I think the world has gotten way too serious, I am pleased to know that a good laugh is as close as the local hardware store.

So honey, how about a new bath tub?

Copyright © 2003-2006 by Carol Ross and Associates, LLC, www.carolrossandassociates.com. Contact carol@carolrossandassociates.com for reprint permission. If you enjoyed this article, visit Carol's blog, www.blog.carolrossandassociates.com, and podcasts, www.liveactioncoaching.com and www.leadingwithawholenewmind.com. Carol is an executive coach, organization development consultant, and writer. A former Bell Labs engineer, her clients are intelligent, analytical professionals who are ready to be more creative and energized in their work and life. While her degrees in engineering from Northwestern University have served her well, it's been her life and work experiences that have moved her to do her best work. She is certified by The Coaches Training Institute and credentialed by the International Coach Federation.