What Le Creuset Taught Me About 401(k) Plan Plans (and Everything You Don't Really Need)

By Ary Rosenbaum, Esq.

My wife loves Le Creuset. And like any good husband who understands that a happy marriage sometimes begins with a well-stocked kitchen, I love Le Creuset too. I'm not talking about casually picking up a Dutch oven once every few years. I'm talking about planning trips around Factory-to-Table sales. San Jose. Miami. Hartford. Northern Virginia. If Le Creuset ever holds a sale on the moon, I'll be looking into frequent flyer miles and figuring out whether TSA allows enameled cast iron in zero gravity. We have two full sets. Two. One of which is still sitting in boxes, patiently waiting for a second house that we don't actually own. Yet. It's aspirational cookware, which is probably a phrase that should not exist, but here we are.

The $300 Solution to Every Problem

Here's what irks me. There seems to be a Le Creuset product for every conceivable cooking task, each one beautifully designed, each one marketed as essential, and each one priced somewhere between $200 and $300. There's a bread oven, a rice pot, a braiser, a shallow casserole, a deep casserole, and something called a "signature everyday pan," which sounds like it was named by a committee that ran out of ideas but still had a marketing budget to justify. And every time I see one of these, I ask the same question. Do you really need this? Because if you own a Dutch oven, which we do in multiple sizes and colors, you can bake bread in it. You can make rice in it. You can braise in it. You can probably do just about anything short of filing your Form 5500 with it. Yet that doesn't stop Le Creuset from creating a specialized version for each of those tasks.

The Dutch Oven Is the Plan

A well-designed 401(k) plan is like a good Dutch oven. It's versatile, reliable, and capable of handling most of what you need. You don't need complexity for the sake of complexity. You need something that works. A solid recordkeeper, a reasonable investment lineup, proper compliance oversight, and a fiduciary process that doesn't resemble a reality show elimination round. That's your Dutch oven. That's your plan. You can run a highly effective retirement plan with that foundation alone. Everything else should be evaluated through the lens of whether it actually adds value, not whether it looks good in a proposal.

The Bread Oven Pitch

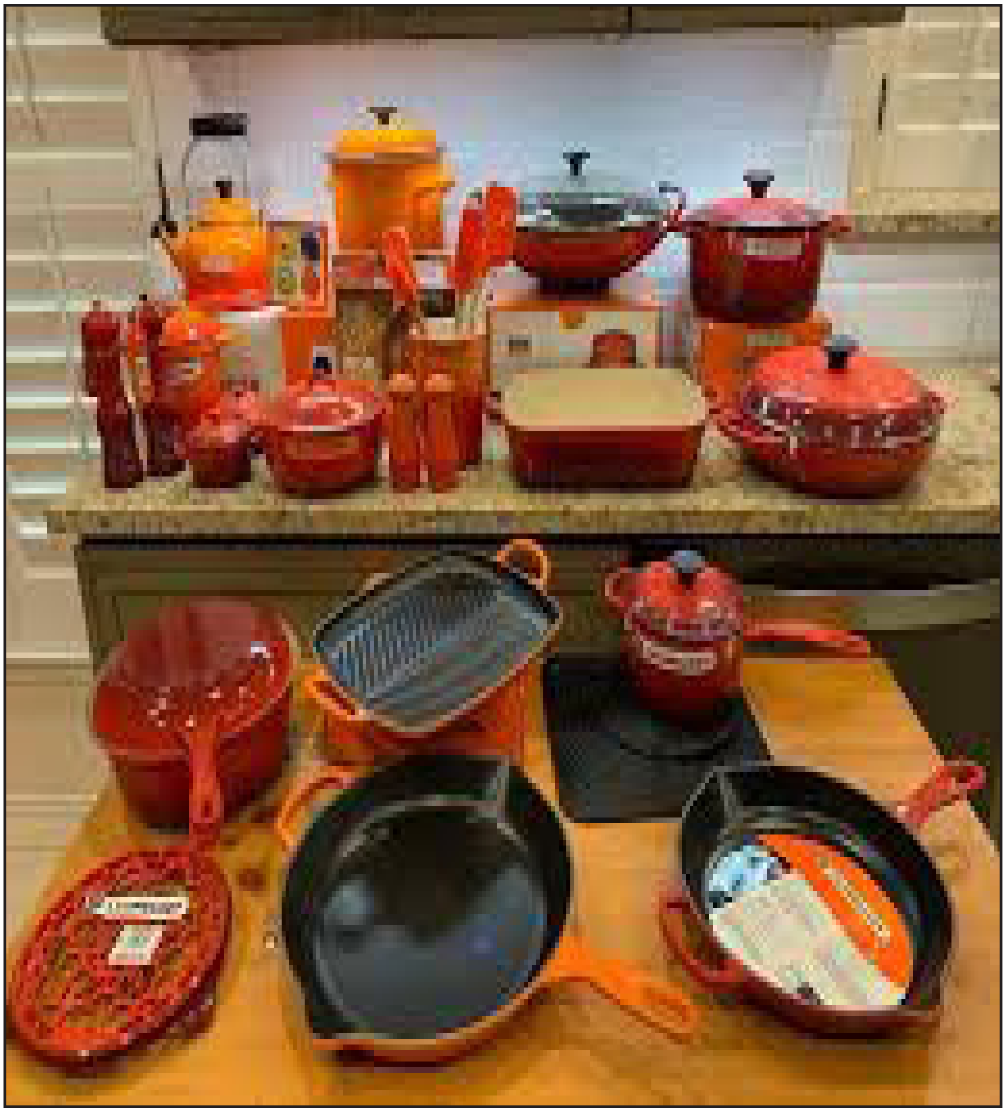
Le Creuset will happily sell you a bread oven that promises better crust, better shape, and better results. It looks fantastic, and I won't deny that there's an appeal to having something purpose-built. But is it necessary? Not really. In the retirement plan world, this is where the parallels become obvious. Plan providers offer add-on services that sound impressive and look great in presentations but don't materially improve participant outcomes. They are positioned as must-haves when they are often just nice-to-haves. They exist because they can be sold, not because they are essential.

The Collection Problem

The same goes for the endless array of cookware options. A rice pot, a braiser, an everyday pan, each one designed for a specific purpose, each one presented as something you're missing. Before you know it, you're building a collection rather than a kitchen. In the 401(k) space, this shows up as layers of services stacked on top of each other. Managed accounts layered on top of target-date funds, advice services layered on top of that, specialized tools that overlap in function and purpose. Each one can be justified individually, but together they create complexity that often outweighs the benefit. The plan stops being streamlined and starts becoming cluttered.

More Is Not Always Better

Le Creuset understands human psychology, and so do plan providers. People equate more with better. More features, more tools, more options, more sophistication. But more often leads to more confusion, more cost, and more fiduciary responsibility. I've



sat in enough committee meetings to know that the more you add, the harder it becomes to explain, monitor, and defend. At some point, the plan stops being a tool and starts becoming something that requires constant explanation just to justify its existence.

The Factory-to-Table Effect

If you've ever been to a Le Creuset Factory-to-Table sale, you know exactly how this works. There's urgency, excitement, and the sense that you're getting a deal you can't pass up. And suddenly you're buying something you didn't even know existed five minutes earlier. Plan providers operate in a similar environment. There's always a new feature, a new enhancement, a new solution that promises to take your plan to the next level. It all sounds great in the moment, and sometimes it even makes sense. But too often, decisions are driven by the excitement of the pitch rather than the necessity of the solution.
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Fiduciary Discipline Matters

The challenge for plan sponsors is that they're not just consumers. They're fiduciaries. Their job isn't to build the most impressive-looking plan. Their job is to build the most effective one. That requires discipline. It requires asking whether a service actually improves outcomes, whether it duplicates something already in place, whether participants will use it, and whether the cost is justified. "It sounds nice" is not a fiduciary standard, and it certainly won't hold up if someone starts asking hard questions.

When Extra Tools Make Sense

This isn't an argument against innovation or additional services. There are times when specialized tools make sense. There are situations where a different approach can genuinely improve outcomes. But those decisions should be intentional, not automatic. The problem arises when plans are built based on what sounds good rather than what is needed. Just because something exists doesn't mean it belongs in your plan.

The Second Set Sitting in Boxes

Let's go back to my house for a moment. That second set of Le Creuset sitting in boxes is there for a future that may or may not happen. It's aspirational. And in the retirement plan world, I see the same thing. Plans designed for a level of complexity or scale that doesn't exist. Features added because they might be useful someday. Services included just in case. It's the fiduciary equivalent of buying cookware for a kitchen you don't have.

Master the Basics

The best chefs in the world don't rely on dozens of specialized tools. They master a few and use them exceptionally well. The same should be true for retirement plans. A well-run plan doesn't need everything. It needs thoughtful design, clear governance, reasonable costs, and providers who deliver on what they promise. That's your Dutch oven. Everything else is optional.

Final Thought: Resist the Bread Oven

Will I go to another Le Creuset sale? Of course. Will I be tempted to buy something I don't need? Absolutely. But I'll go in knowing the difference between what looks good and what actually adds value. And that's really the lesson for plan sponsors. Not every shiny new offering is necessary. Not every enhancement improves outcomes. Sometimes, the best decision is the simplest one. Because if a Dutch oven can already bake the bread, you probably don't

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