

'Shopaholics' and 'Affluenza'

Most of the items in our homes have been purchased. What we buy, and how much, can make a significant difference to the household's environmental impact. Shopping has now become the most popular leisure activity outside the home.

Shopping and the impacts of consumerism

We are *consumers* in the literal dictionary sense - we no longer hunt but we gather and use. And after our use, there is only waste, which is carted away unseen.

Many people accumulate large quantities of 'stuff' in their homes and yet still feel dissatisfied, while neighbours, who may have very few material possessions, seem to be content as long as they are well-fed, healthy and warm. A strong materialist orientation has been associated with diminished life satisfaction, impaired self-esteem, dissatisfaction with friendships and leisure activities and a predisposition to depression. Depression has increased tenfold over the last 50 years.

In North America a condition has been dubbed '**Affluenza**'. This new noun is defined as: "1. *The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses.* 2. *An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American dream.*" In the USA and Canada, people looking for more from less have started a 'Voluntary Simplicity Movement' promoting lower and more sustainable consumption levels. (see www.newdream.org/ ; www.getssatisfied.org/ ; www.simpleliving.net/)

Consumer choices

Whenever we buy goods we make choices and show our preferences. The commercial world has great interest in these questions and invests huge sums in both market research and advertising, trying to

influence our 'consumer choices'. When you next see television or print advertising, notice when firms are:

- ▶ **building 'demand' for the type of product**
- ▶ **establishing an identifiable brand name**
- ▶ **repetitively promoting a named retailer**
- ▶ **directing your attention at the 'point of sale'**

The cost of all this advertising has to be reclaimed from customers, either in high unit sale price or in a greater volume of sales.

Escaping television's incessant sales messages

Could advertising be affecting your household's shopping choices? If you watch TV you might see over 10,000 TV commercials in a year! And it's worse for children. The average American child will see 20,000 commercials a year.

Many alternative pastimes to television are available and they need not be expensive. Examples include reading library books and magazines, sports or table-top games, computer activities, clubs, cooking, sewing, crafts, fishing, gardening, care of pets, walking.....

As long as we accept "free to air" TV and cheap newspapers we will have to put up with the advertising that pays for it. Realistically, you'll have to rely on becoming a critical consumer, and not being taken in by sales pressures.

What's behind your shopping choices?

- ✓ Safety and health aspects
- ✓ Value for money
- ✓ Suitable for the job
- ✓ Resource efficiency
- ✓ Durability of goods, or if cleanable
- ✓ Is it over-packaged?
- ✓ Final destination
- ✓ Ethical issues

Actions on everyday shopping items

We don't have to get caught up in the rush to buy - alternative consumers (25% of people in France) distance themselves from advertising and are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products.

Questions to ask before you buy:

- ▶ Can I provide it myself?
- ▶ Could I obtain it from a friend or neighbour?
- ▶ Can it be obtained through a bartering scheme?
- ▶ Is it feasible to repair rather than replace an item?
- ▶ Could I hire instead of buying?
- ▶ Can I buy it second hand?
- ▶ Could I own it jointly with a friend? This could be a good approach for cars and other larger items.
- ▶ Is it really a "bargain"? The most heavily promoted 'discounted' items may not be the best value.

Check out the Packaging

- ▶ **You can refuse a plastic bag** (reuse plastic bags, bring own bag or ask for a cardboard box).
- ▶ **Select items that can be bought loose** rather than individually wrapped products or fresh food that's sold on film-covered polystyrene trays.
- ▶ **Favour the items in recyclable packaging** (e.g. glass jars, cans, moulded cardboard, but for plastic only codes 1 and 2) over those that are not recyclable.
- ▶ **Avoid too much take-away food** as its packaging is often excessive, and once grease-soiled that packaging is not recyclable.
- ▶ **Buy refills** of household detergents and other chemicals or make your own cleaners.

Avoid disposables

- ▶ Kerbside milk in glass bottles has almost disappeared but it may be possible to obtain doorstep delivery of organic fruit and vegetables, without packaging, in a 'box scheme'.
- ▶ Use alternatives to once-only items, eg
 - ✓ China or thicker plastic cups and plates, which are reusable, rather than 'disposable' paper or light plastic.
 - ✓ Use biodegradable plates that can be composted.
 - ✓ Washable cotton handkerchiefs, face-flannels, dinner napkins and cloth nappies are preferable to disposable paper, plastic and cotton ones.
 - ✓ Favour unbleached cotton if available
 - ✓ If you have a baby in your household use cloth nappies – see www.thenappynetwork.org.nz
 - ✓ An electric razor/shaver is probably preferable to several years' supply of disposable metal and plastic razors, in terms of materials efficiency. Some razors have replaceable blades – minimal waste compared to one-piece designs.
 - ✓ Use rechargeable batteries.
 - ✓ Favour new compact light bulbs which need replacing less often.

The case for organic fruit and vegetables

Are you concerned about pesticide exposure and genetic engineering? Many pesticides permitted in food production are potential carcinogens (cancer causing substances). So what can you do about it?

Grow your own fruit and vegetables, and avoid chemicals.

Buy 'certified organic' if you can't grow your own.



Among non-organic foods, avoid produce from genetically modified (GMO or GE) crops – you can get a checklist of products from Greenpeace Ph. 0800 4 GE FREE www.greenpeace.org.nz/truefood.

Eat NZ fresh produce in season. Food imports are treated with pesticides and/or fungicides to keep their 'fresh' appearance and to meet NZ's bio-security regulations. There is also a large energy cost in shipping fruit and veges between hemispheres.

Peel fresh produce that may have been sprayed (i.e. non-organic), to reduce your pesticide intake, especially if the skin feels waxy.

Still want to eat meat

A vegetarian lifestyle is healthier. And there are many environmental and health impacts globally associated with the production of meat so buy and cook relatively less meat and more vegetable proteins. **Eat more fish** as it has a lower-fat source of protein than most animal meats, and the oil component is healthy. NZ has a major fish export industry as well as a domestic market. **But check out your fish choices first** as some harvesting is unsustainable. See the latest 'Best Fish Guide' www.forestandbird.org.nz

Read the fine print

Note what food labels tell you, particularly about preservatives, additives and colourings. See the free booklet 'Identifying Food Additives' from NZ Food Safety Authority: 0800 693 721 www.nzfsa.govt.nz

Seek out reputable environmental claims. Look for evidence of independent environmental certification, such as the recently introduced *EnviroMark*, at Gold Standard or above. (For information, www.landcareresearch.co.nz)

For manufactured goods a NZ Government-backed scheme setting standards is *Environmental Choice*.



Other label claims. There is no legal definition of many product label claims such as 'hypo-allergenic', 'anti-bacterial' or 'free range'. Be skeptical.

You may wish to avoid **parabens** (preservatives) common in cosmetics and sunscreens – paraben free cosmetics are now available or you can try making your own.

Made in New Zealand? Goods that have not been shipped across the oceans cost less in fossil fuels, but also have the advantage of supporting local manufacturing.

Check those imported goods!

There is scope for '**ethical shopping**', particularly with imported goods. NZ has an ethical trader, *Trade Aid Importers*, whose shops stock items made by partner businesses in 30 countries. A larger proportion of their retail price reaches the makers, *Trade Aid* claims, and they encourage use of environmentally-sustainable materials, safe production methods, respect for the needs and aspirations of the workers, advocacy against child labour and funding for health and education projects. They protect their partners' traditional craft skills and help to develop new products, which can expand fair trade export markets.

Happier Shopping

NZ has high levels of private indebtedness. Credit cards, charging relatively high levels of interest, are a key part of this urge to spend beyond our means. Support the annual international 'Buy Nothing Day' (usually in late November) which encourages shoppers to cut up their credit cards as a reminder of the need to control impulse buying.

For more detailed information refer to the website www.sustainableliving.org.nz