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HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

Tis the Season for...Upselling!

By Jane Peterson, PhD

Duck! The most famous retail day of the US year is streaking towards the mall nearest you. I mean the day after Thanksgiving, of course. Unless you love to "shop till you drop," you, like me, won't be joining the early birds at the mall at midnight Thanksgiving evening. I place a higher value on sleep than spending.

When I saw the announcement the mall would open at midnight Thanksgiving day, I had to ask myself, how did being the first in line to spend your hard earned money on "stuff" become so important to us - not just in America, but in emerging nations as well? When did wearing the latest "hot" brand become more important than the person underneath those brand-name goods?

Thankfully, Juliet Schor had some answers. For nearly 20 years, Dr. Schor, a professor of sociology who was originally a Harvard economics professor, has been studying why Americans work so hard and spend so much. She identified a key confluence of marketing and media that results in a practice she called, "upselling." It used to be in the 1950s that a family measured it's social standing by comparing its housing and material goods with the people living next door, or at the most a few blocks down. This was, of course, before "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" was beamed into directly your living room in the 1984 television show. Once television, and now the internet, became entrenched in our daily lives, it became possible for ordinary folks to compare themselves with winners of the climb up our socio-economic ladder. We no longer measured ourselves by comparison to our neighbors but to the rich and famous. It was no longer enough to be middle class.

Of course, few of us will be able to enjoy the kind of material wealth that those at the top command. An article on the future of retail in Harvard Business Review describes a scene that those who win the jobs and financial lottery will be able to enjoy. "Amy" is depicted as preparing for a winter cruise to a Caribbean island, and needing a new wardrobe to match her vacation. Like a queen, modern media allows her to scan available merchandise, have her selections waiting in the nearest store for her to try on, allows her to price shop for her favorites on her mobile phone in the dressing room, and offers her a specially discounted offer for an additional garment on her way out of the mall. "Saving" money while spending it has never been easier.

This pressure to push prices down and increase consumption, however, undermines the foundations of fair and humane exchange - and the ability of people to earn a living wage



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from producing the goods and services that we really need. The so-called "race to the bottom," predicted by Alan Tonelson and others, is well underway. The question is whether or not there will be any long-term winners.

The Occupy Wall Street movement certainly raises awareness of the plight of those who are disenfranchised by this system of having more for less. It doesn't get to the root causes though. The more we begin to understand what motivates human beings, how our visual systems actually work, what triggers basic responses in our physiology and mental/emotional states, the easier it becomes for those who wish to manipulate us. In *Born to Buy*, Dr. Schor lays bare the exquisite manipulation of our children by marketing gurus. If you aren't at least a little bit afraid of Facebook and Google, you aren't thinking. In [my dissertation](#) four years ago, I wrote, "it won't be "big brother" who is watching you (a reference to George Orwell's book, 1984), it will be Google and Bank of America."

But is it all bad government and evil marketers who are driving us to this frenzy of consumption? In a recent article in the Guardian, [Will California Become the First Failed State](#),

Paul Harris investigates the on-going financial troubles of our neighbors to the South. Starting this summer, California has been unable to pay its debts and is instead offering IOU's. Yet even when then governor Arnold Schwarzenegger presented Californians with opportunities to take the opportunity to face the fact that their government was spending far more money than it collected through taxes, they refused to make the hard choices. For a nation that has become addicted to credit cards and debt, why should we expect politicians to do what we often find ourselves unable to do?

I once did a small sociological experiment with myself - I took on a year's long subscription to Vogue magazine. As a seamstress and artist, I thought I might enjoy the inspiration looking at couture styles. Instead, I discovered that my sense of dissatisfaction with my own body and the clothes hanging limply on the hangers in my closet increased each time an issue arrived in my mail box. Even though I understood very well that clothing a kind of language and one of the many status markers we human's manipulate to display rank and access to resources, I was affected by the images. The visual brain is a more primitive part of the brain than the rational brain!

Could it be, that like the old comic book character, Pogo, if we look in the mirror of our disappearing sense of "enough" and our place as American's in the economical hierarchy, we may find "the enemy is us?" If so, what can we do to recover the values of hard work, thrift, and helping your neighbor that build this country into an international economic



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powerhouse?

What you can do:

- * Become aware of how you are being manipulated and up sold. Check out alternatives such as the [Center for the New American Dream](#) - get some support for sticking up for your values.
- * Limit your exposure to media that makes you feel "less than." In Annie Leonard's "[the story of stuff](#)", she illustrates the "you suck!! Wheel" of working and watching television (or internet), feeling out of style, buying, working to pay for what you bought, etc.
- * Watch out for those messages that equate self-worth with material things. Those "things" won't love you when you are sick, or celebrate your life's accomplishments with you. Spending "time" instead of "money" to nurture relationships is one of the ways of building "social capital" - and feeling better besides.
- * Be grateful for what you *do* have. This one is as old as human beings, and still powerful.
- * Figure out what you *really* value. Take some time this winter asking yourself what makes you happy, what makes you light up? What would it really take to have more of that in your life?
- * Serve. Making a contribution to the welfare of others is one of the best things you can do for yourself. Opportunities to volunteer, even for a few hours, abound this time of year. If you live in Portland, here's a great way to get started: <http://www.handsonportland.org/>
Most of all Enjoy! Whatever you do and who ever you are with, make an effort to be with them in joy.