



My 30 Days of Consumer Celibacy



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For a whole month, one writer practiced a kind of abstinence so she could better understand her own complicity in our throwaway culture. It wasn't easy.

A few days into a vow of shopping celibacy, I visit a Hallmark store with my kids. The 75-percent-off rack draws me in. I've forgotten that I'm supposed to be living according to the Compact, an agreement to avoid all new purchases in favor of used goods in an attempt to reduce my impact on the environment.

"Look at these cute penguins," I say, showing them to my kids.

My 10-year-old son, Sam, picks one up. "Cool. They poop candy."



Illustration: Francisco Cacares

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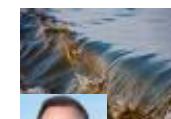
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I pay and leave the store before realizing what I've done. I stop short. "I am not supposed to buy anything new!" I yelp. My kids glare at me. "Well," I say, taking a deep breath, "I will just have to start again tomorrow."

The original Compacters, who formed their group in early 2006, did not intend to start a movement. It was just 10 San Francisco friends trying to reduce their consumption by not buying new stuff for a year. The group's manifesto was simple: to counteract the negative global environmental and socioeconomic impacts of U.S. consumer culture. Named after the Pilgrims' revolutionary Mayflower Compact, the small idea led to a Yahoo Web site that has attracted more than 8,000 adherents and spawned some 50 groups in spots as far-flung as Hong Kong and Iceland.

What they don't say on the Compact Web site: Kicking consumerism may require its own 12-step program. So after my Hallmark relapse, I started again from square one. According to the guidelines, I must buy used, or borrow. No new stuff, with the exception of food, necessary medicines and health care items, and -- no joke -- underwear.

"This all started over a dinner conversation about the limitations of recycling," says Rachel Kesel, a professional dog walker and one of the original friends who established the Compact. What else could people do to tread more lightly on the earth? "One of the solutions is not to buy so much crap."

The average American generates about 4.5 pounds of trash a day -- a figure that, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, includes paper, food, yard trimmings, furniture, and everything else you toss out at home and on the job. That makes the United States the trashiest country in the industrialized world, followed by Canada at 3.75 pounds a day and the Netherlands at 3 pounds a day. In part, we can thank the corporations that spend billions to convince us that the newest, shiniest widgets will make us happy and attract friends and lovers. What's more, each new widget is designed to wear out or otherwise fade into obsolescence, so we'll have almost no choice but to buy more and more. In the words of Dr. Seuss's Once-ler in *The Lorax*, "A Thneed's a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!!" The old Thneed -- often in working condition -- goes out with the trash. And in the process of making thneeds, the Swomee-Swans get smog in their throats and the Super-Axe-Hacker whacks all the Truffala-Trees, and the gills of the Humming-Fish get gummed up with Gluppity-Glup.

I was already an eco-savvy consumer when I began my moratorium on new stuff. I bought organic produce, "green" beauty products, compact fluorescent lightbulbs, and the like. "A month won't be too bad," I told my preteen daughter. Without thinking I added, "I'll just buy everything I need beforehand." She

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laughed. AS IF I WERE JOKING.

The Compact has, for the most part, attracted people who were already living frugally or eco-consciously and whose dismay over society's overzealous buying habits may have been brewing for some time. Such feelings are not universally shared. On a Seattle radio show that aired just after the group formed, the host ripped into John Perry, one of the original Compacting friends, saying, "You people are bad for America and you're bad for the American economy."

A Web forum mocking the Compact sprang up, one of the first posts proclaiming, "Today I'm starting a Compact wherein no one can buy anything yellow. Except bananas. And lemons. ... Oh, wait. I need legal pads." The Compact founders were called pretentious, since they live upper-middle-class lives, and hypocritical, since one of them works in marketing -- the art and science of selling goods.

After this criticism, the Compacters consulted several economists about the soundness of their premise. Alex Tabarrok, a professor of economics at George Mason University, theorizes that if throngs of citizens shopped secondhand, it would drive the market to produce higher-quality, more durable goods. Some sectors of the economy would expand, he says, as people spent more money on services or used goods, which are often sold by smaller, independent business owners. But if enough of us started buying less stuff, wouldn't corporate profits fall, leading to layoffs and a drop in the gross domestic product -- that classic index of the economy?

I ran this by Bob Costanza, a professor of ecological economics at the University of Vermont who has given some thought to the question. "If 'growing GDP' is considered to be the goal, then yes, buying secondhand will hurt 'the economy' because less stuff will be produced per unit time," he says. "But this just shows how wrong this narrow conception of the economy is." So maybe we need to rethink the way we define a strong economy to encompass not only the health of our financial markets, but also the health of our natural resources.

Still, not everyone immediately grasps why buying used products has less impact on the environment than buying new ones. When you buy a new widget -- a cell phone, for example -- the store orders a replacement, instigating a chain of events that eventually leads to more raw material being mined from the earth. In contrast, when you buy used, the seller -- at a garage sale, a thrift store, or on eBay -- does not put in a replacement order. The chain stops there. I nearly lost a friend once when I bought a used teak table after I had exhorted her never to buy anything that wasn't made from sustainably harvested wood. My purchase did not cause a living tree to be cut down, I told her. She didn't get it.

Giving up new stuff forced me to shop creatively. A visit to Goodwill yielded a travel mug for my Starbucks visits, clothes for my daughter, and a bongo drum to substitute for the practice pad my son needed for his drum lessons. Buying a basketball net proved more challenging. I found one through Freecycle, a Web



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drum lessons. Buying a basketball net proved more challenging. I found one through Freecycle, a web site where users trade belongings, but it had so much rust it wouldn't have passed muster with my suburban homeowners' association. After much looking, I bought a like-new one for \$30 on my local Craigslist Web site. Then it took two weeks and 55 e-mail, text, and voice messages before I got my basketball net.

When my laptop went on the fritz, I panicked. I needed a working computer, so I went shopping for a new one. This time, the widget-maker's plan to lure me into buying the newest, shiniest model backfired. Microsoft's new Windows Vista operating system won't work with the perfectly good computer accessories I already own, so if I were to fork over a grand for a new laptop, I'd also have to buy new software, new drivers, and new Microsoft Office programs. Exasperated, I took a deep breath and went home. Sticking to my Compact vow, I hauled an old dinosaur of a computer out of the closet while I waited, impatiently, for laptop repairs.

I wondered: Am I really making a difference? Do I need to eliminate everything I would ordinarily buy new? The answer surprised me. In The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices, Michael Brower and Warren Leon of the Union of Concerned Scientists calculated the impact of various consumer purchases on four environmental problem areas: air pollution, water pollution, global warming, and habitat alteration. They analyzed the environmental footprints of everything from cheese to carpet to feminine products and then aggregated them into 50 categories of goods and services. In the end, they found that just 7 of the 50 categories were responsible for the lion's share of environmental degradation: cars and trucks; meat and poultry farming; crop production; home heating, hot water, and air conditioning; household appliances; home construction; and household water use and sewage treatment.

Interestingly, the personal items I worked so hard to forgo are not among the worst offenders. Clothing, books, magazines, and toys account for a relatively small fraction of the total environmental destruction wrought by our modern lifestyle. Brower and Leon suggest that we focus on choices that matter most: alternative energy utility providers, energy-saving appliances, organic food, and fuel-efficient or hybrid cars. Over time, buying smart may be more important than buying used.

I grew up in a log cabin with a hippie dad who chose simplicity. We had an outhouse, wood stoves, chickens, and a vegetable garden. Compacting should be second nature to me. Still, I found myself rebelling. I'm a self-employed single mom! Call me an impatient American consumer, but the truth is, I both care passionately about the environment and live in a world where I often have zero extra time. And shopping for used stuff takes lots of time. I made a commitment some time ago to use my purchasing power to help the environment, and spending a month Compacting forced me to reexamine my priorities. It also helped me reconsider my needs versus my wants. We could have forgone the candy-pooing penguins, and I can find many perfectly good things used -- and at less cost. But eventually, I will need a



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brand new laptop.

"I don't think everyone has to stop shopping to change American consumption habits," Rachel Kesel tells me. "But a lot of people need to be put on detox for a while."

AND WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Home energy use is responsible for 35 percent of the average American household's total greenhouse gas emissions, about as much as car use and other transportation combined (32 percent). Food ranks third at 12 percent, due in part to the 1,300 miles the average meal travels from farm to plate. Visit www.localharvest.org for tips on buying local foods, www.energyhog.org to cut home energy use, and www.fueleconomy.gov to find the most fuel-efficient car.

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