

THE IPHONE AND CONSUMER GUILT

By Annie Leonard

The traditional first rule of business is to give the customers what they want. Steve Jobs thought differently. "It's not the consumers' job," he said, "to know what they want."

Some people think that's cool — the cocky self-confidence of a visionary with uncompromising standards. But I can't help but hear it as a reminder that companies target consumers by creating desires we didn't know we had and meeting them with cheap shiny gadgets we didn't know we needed. And when the companies get caught trashing the environment or mistreating their workers, everyone blames the customers — that's us — for demanding cheap shiny gadgets.

I've been thinking about this since news of the suicides at the Foxconn factory in China and other revelations about the disturbing details of Apple's supply chain produced a wave of guilt among Americans who can't imagine life without their iPhones, iPads and iPods. ([In March 2012], after an Apple-endorsed investigation of factory conditions by the independent Fair Labor Association, Foxconn agreed to end illegal overtime, improve safety and

upgrade worker housing.)

Sometimes it seems everything we buy is tarnished by guilt. Whether it's electronics from unsafe factories, clothes from oppressive sweatshops or coffee from the rainforest, we blame ourselves and our fellow consumers for our complicity in an unjust and unsustainable system. In a course I'm taking on impacts of the global economy, a classmate said: "It's our fault. We're driving this system. If we didn't buy the stuff, the manufacturers wouldn't make it."

Consumer as king is the gospel of today's marketplace. In an oft-cited editorial *The Economist* declared: "Brands do not rule consumers; consumers rule brands." After I wrote my local newspaper decrying all the branded schwag hospitals hand out to new mothers, one angry woman wrote me to object: "We control the manufacturers. It is never them controlling us, and it never has been."

Really? Ask yourself:

- If Apple didn't keep rolling out new, massively-hyped models, how many owners of perfectly functional iPhones would want a new one after a few months?
- Before single-serving plastic bottles, who wanted to carry around a throwaway container of water that, despite no guarantee of being cleaner or safer, costs thousands of times more than what comes out of the tap?



- How many mothers would have thought the best way to protect their kids was with pajamas soaked in neurotoxic flame-retardant chemicals, still on the market 35 years they were first identified as a health risk?

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith argued that companies aren't just giving us what we want; they're also manufacturing "wants that previously did not exist." "Production," he wrote, "only fills a void that itself has created."

Maybe the \$130 billion-plus spent on advertising in the United States in 2010 had something to do with it. Last year, Apple alone spent almost \$1 billion on advertising to persuade us that the latest version of their devices will transform our lives. They add cool new features, sure, but they also tweak the designs just enough that the hippest users can tell at a glance if you're a loser who's still using last year's model. That's not just planned obsolescence, it's perceived obsolescence.

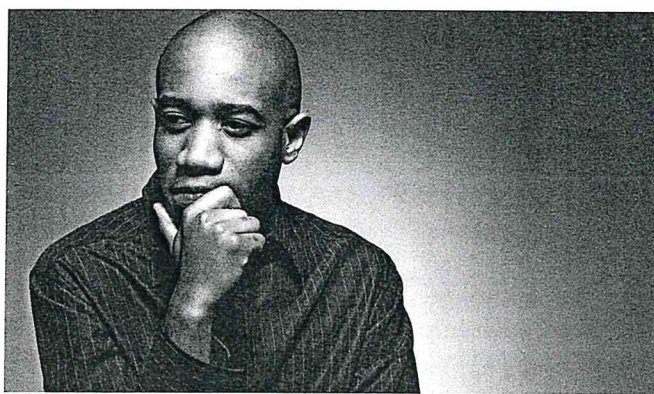
Another tactic is making us feel we're in charge by offering us lots of choices. Choices, after all, create profitable niche markets. In *Consumed*, Rutgers political theorist Benjamin Barber says we are "seduced into thinking that the right to choose from a menu is the essence of liberty, but the power is in the determination of what's on the menu. The powerful are those who set the agenda, not those who choose from the alternatives it offers."

I'm not saying we are powerless to make ethical choices with our purchases or that our choices can't influence the marketplace. The problem with believing the best way to make change is by voting with our pocketbooks is that it defines us as consumers, not citizens. It implies that the most important choices are made in the supermarket aisles rather than in the halls of government and corporate towers.

Next time someone says they feel guilty for owning an iPhone, ask if they were the one who decided to maintain a 73 percent profit margin while underpaying workers on 18-hour-shifts. Did they decide to roll out new models at breakneck speed? To use conflict minerals and toxic chemicals? I didn't think so. The most important ethical choice is not the decision to buy an iPhone, but the decision made on how to make, market and sell it.

Let's stop thinking like consumers and think like citizens. By all means let's shun products from companies whose behavior offends. But let's also realize we can work to change not just the way they act but the way they're allowed to act. Only when every manufacturer of Stuff is required to make it safely and fairly will we know that no matter what we buy, the important choices have already been made.

This article first appeared on The Huffington Post blog on March 30, 2012. Annie Leonard is the Director of the Story of Stuff Project (www.storyofstuff.org/) and author of the book, *The Story of Stuff* (Free Press, March 2010).



TRUE PRICE QUESTIONS

Examine a product you are thinking of purchasing, such as a bottle of water, a fast food cheeseburger, or a T-shirt, and ask the following questions.

1. Is the item a want or a need? The point of this question isn't to make us feel judged about what we consider a want or need, but to help us unpack what is truly vital to our well-being and happiness. We might also have different criteria for whether certain kinds of objects are a need. For example, some people may consider products like a car, a computer, and a cell phone indispensable. And the way we'd categorize those items might be different from the way we'd categorize an item of clothing.

2. What are the effects, both positive and negative, on you, other people, animals, and the environment? This question helps us think deeply, broadly, and critically about all the various impacts of a product throughout its entire lifecycle.

3. What systems support, promote and perpetuate this item? This is a complicated question because our systems are very complex and there are so many underlying systems involved in the production, distribution, use, and disposal of the products we use. We can change our personal choices, but we also need to address the underlying systems involved.

4. What would be an alternative, or a change to a system, that would do more good and less harm? When we can make choices that do more good and less harm (MOGO choices), that's great. But, many times there is no such choice available. There may be no MOGO cell phone, car, or health care plan, for example. So, it's important that we look at what changes in systems would help do more good and less harm and would also lead to humane and sustainable items becoming ubiquitous.

A TRUE PRICE EXAMPLE

Institute for Humane Education faculty led this activity at our recent residency for our graduate students. Here are the responses from one group of students, who briefly explored the impacts of soda in a plastic bottle.

1. Is it a want or a need? It's a want.

2a. What are the positive effects? Caffeine kick; pleasure; jobs; the company does philanthropy; you could repurpose the plastic bottle for building material (e.g., creating a light source).

2b. What are some of the negative effects? Obesity and other negative health effects; plastic is a carcinogen; plastic waste; pollution; the amount of oil used; oil spills that kill animals and destroy habitat; animals consume plastic; habitat destruction, etc.

3. What systems support, promote and perpetuate this item? Economy, cultural, peer pressure, marketing/ads, multinational corporations, globalization.

4. What would be an alternative or a change to a system, that would do more good and less harm? Personally: tap water from a reusable glass. Systemically: create a healthier recipe? bring more work back to the U.S.? more corporate responsibility? incentives to phase out unhealthy drinks and the use of disposable plastics?

QUESTIONS AFTER THE ACTIVITY:

After doing the True Price activity at residency, students explored the seemingly contradictory facts that there's so much we don't know about the products and services we use; and, we also have a belief that we "know" a lot of facts and information, but that "knowledge" hasn't actually come from a deep investigation of, say, research in peer-reviewed journals. We've claimed these beliefs and this knowledge based on what we've heard or read about what others have heard or read.

True Price, then, forces us to look deeper and more critically at not just the impacts of these products on people, animals, and the planet, but also at our own beliefs and assumptions about what we think we know.

Activity used with permission of Institute for Humane Education (IHE) www.humaneeducation.org. IHE believes that education is the key to creating a just, humane, and sustainable world for all people, animals and the environment, and offer programs and resources designed to train, educate and inspire people to become humane educators and changemakers who live with compassion and integrity and work to solve the most pressing challenges of our time.



In *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, William McDonough and Michael Braungart call for the transformation of human industry through ecologically intelligent design. Through historical sketches on the roots of the industrial revolution; commentary on science, nature and society; descriptions of key design principles; and compelling examples of innovative products and business strategies already reshaping the marketplace, they make the case that an industrial system that "takes, makes and wastes" can become a creator of goods and services that generate ecological, social and economic value. Find out more at www.mcdonough.com/cradle_to_cradle.htm.