

COLUMNS

What we buy is now who we are

May 13, 2014



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By AN AMERICAN MARKETER COLUMNIST

By **Shauna Mei**

We have all heard the phrase, "You are what you eat." Though it has been in use for decades, this expression has taken on new resonance in recent years through the rise of the organic, local and slow food movements.

In fact, the average consumer is arguably more knowledgeable than ever before about the impact of her everyday habits.

What started with eating organic or ditching the SUV is slowly evolving into a wholesale approach to conscious consumption that includes the clothes we wear and the objects that decorate our home.

Couple this with changing approaches to where, why and who we buy from and you have a massive movement taking shape. A movement whose mantra, I would argue, is "You are what you buy."

Talking shop

But where exactly did this new, more enlightened consumer come from?

The change is particularly striking when you consider that we are not that far out from the excess-driven decades of the 1980s and 90s.

As with so many of the major behavioral shifts of the last 20 years, the Internet has played a central role. It has exposed consumers to the effects of their consumption habits in a more profound way than ever before.

Though sweatshop conditions and workplace disasters are nothing new in the clothing industry, social media and the viral news machine have shone a spotlight on tragedies like the 2013 garment factory collapse in Bangladesh with a newfound intensity.

This has effectively pulled back the curtain on the global impact of so-called "fast fashion," giving consumers a much greater awareness of the dark side of that \$19 pair of jeans.

Antsy

Much of this Internet-induced awareness has also been directed inwards, at our own self-image.

The rise of social media has fueled a bias towards individualism and provided a platform for its continual expression, with sites such as Instagram and Facebook enabling and encouraging personal branding on a massive scale.

And this new ethos of individuality it has translated to the things we buy: we want them to be as unique and as special as we are.

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What is more is that, as we age, what we buy becomes a reflection of who we are, an extension of our value system. The importance of story and of narrative both for the consumer and the things she surrounds herself with has become paramount.

This desire for story and for meaning has resulted in increased interest from consumers in supporting fledgling brands and artisans, particularly those who create items by hand or otherwise eschew mass production.

The massive success of [Etsy](#) is just one of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon and evidence of the premium consumers place on knowing where an item came from and how it was made.

The act of buying from niche brands and creators enables consumers to support individuals whose skills would otherwise be lost due to the effects of globalization.

And, [as Slate writer Ray Fisman notes](#), artisan workers offer "the personal touch and judgment that can't be provided by a machine or someone 12 time zones away."

Making it

Consumers are frequently driven to support their local communities through their spending, which explains why products marketed as locally- or American-made are enjoying a particular heyday.

The Web site, [Maker's Row](#), recently sprung up to help U.S. designers who want to ride this wave by connecting them with reliable and high-quality United States manufacturers.

Urban areas such as [Portland](#) in Oregon, [Brooklyn](#) in New York and San Francisco have frequently been cited as the epicenter of the new "artisan economy."

And while it is easy to think of this phenomenon as limited to hip urban areas, many artisanal startups and entrepreneurs [have reported](#) seeing an increasing number of orders from across the country.

Even when an item cannot be handmade or produced in small batches, consumers are interested in knowing exactly how and where it was produced.

Take, for example, luxury maker [Everlane](#), whose tagline is "radical transparency" and which includes photos and a detailed description of every factory that makes its clothing under a [dedicated tab](#) on its Web site. Such a practice would have been unheard of or even laughable a decade ago, but today's consumers demand it.

The modern consumer wants not simply to acquire more "stuff," but to feel inspired by the things she buys.

Knowing how an item of clothing was made or where a piece of furniture came from is a means by which to insert herself into the story.

Similarly, spending money on lesser known brands or artisan-made goods is a way to support a cause, as opposed to just taking part in crass consumerism.

WHILE THERE IS still work to be done to make "you are what you buy" the philosophy of consumers everywhere, there can be little doubt that this movement has gone mainstream.

Many of the pieces are in place to encourage shoppers away from thoughtless consumption of disposable goods and towards informed purchases of more meaningful and better-quality items. I for one am excited to see how it all plays out.

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