

“As the world wakes up to the perils of excess consumption, is the marketing discipline condemned to be principal villain?”

A MODEST PROPOSAL

For Saving Innocent Americans from the Perils of Excess Consumption Caused by Manipulative and Vile Marketing

It is a burdensome and tragic experience to see New York’s subways swell with full-figured adults fighting to catch their breath as they descend twelve stairs to the platform, staring longingly at empty seats that are too narrow for their wide bodies. They are forced to carry an arsenal of bottles of diabetes, blood pressure and cholesterol prescriptions while slender, fit men and women speed-walk past them to the train. Every day these innocent people must ingest viciously calculated claims and images that feed their consumption habits. Instead of delicious broccoli and spinach, their children will be forced to eat fast food, sugary cereal, soda, and deep-fried meats.

Above ground, the effects of excessive consumption are equally devastating. Women shopping along Fifth Avenue are so weighed down with fur coats, enormous animal hide handbags, and other metal hardware, that they risk serious injury, from stiletto sprains to taxi-cab collisions. Dirty luxury marketing has made street intersections particularly perilous for older wealthy women, who attempt to carry Bloomingdale’s “Big Brown Bag,” while still recovering from the latest Botox injection.

The deplorable societal compulsion to binge-buy is most taxing for those without an income: teenagers and senior citizens. Young teens face insurmountable strife day after day; deep-reaching word-of-mouth marketing (Commonly known as “peer pressure,” I am told) drives them to beg and plead for Blackberries, laptops, and iPods – the latest technological innovation, at any cost. Retired persons are also an easy target for marketers. I recently learned of one heartbreaking case, wherein an elderly woman was actually buried alive under the miniature figurines, commemorative coins, kitchen implements, and special edition hardback books that she was forced to buy from catalogs mailed directly to her home!

I think it is agreed by all parties that these scenes of excess are a great grievance and an offense to our nation; and, therefore, I propose that we immediately institute a basic and efficient system to rescue our people from precarious and pervasive exploitation by marketers.

Under our current system, consumers are unjustly expected to decide whether or not procurement is an appropriate option, leaving them vulnerable to stealthy advertisements. I propose a system that will free consumers from the burden of the decision. A specially-appointed committee focused solely on maintaining a suitable level of consumption will take on the grim and arduous role of approving or denying each purchase and setting the terms of use.

The committee shall supply all citizens with an electronic payment card that requires approval for all purchases. Upon reaching check-out, the consumer will merely submit the card and, automatically, the swipe will send a standardized request for approval to purchase to the Consumption Control Committee.

After the Consumption Control Committee receives the request for purchase, they will complete a basic assessment to determine whether the good or service is vital to the consumer's existence. They will assume responsibility for a swift review of purchasing records and receipts to ensure the item will fill a void rather than duplicate previous consumption activities. And, ultimately, the committee will deliver their mandate to the consumer: buy or not buy.

Once this system is set into action, I propose we develop further controls to protect American consumers. It will be of great benefit to the companies that produce goods and services if we also curb all spending on frivolous marketing materials and advertising agency fees. Packaging will simply describe what the product does. Dove soap will be "bar to wash body" and Louis Vuitton will be "leather bag to carry items." We will forgo branding to focus our efforts on a truly egalitarian, function-based system.

This ideal system will be the model of social assistance in the twenty-first century. An outsourced purchasing system will ensure that consumers make responsible purchasing decisions that will improve their general health and well-being. Consumers will no longer worry about whether a menu item falls outside their dietary restrictions or feel pressured to fly by private jet. A woman left alone with a credit card in a massive shopping complex will no longer be a threat to herself or her society. Huzzah!

Secondly, by improving the health, hearts, and minds of our people, we will create stronger individuals who can collectively fortify our nation's position as a dominant world power. A fit population will be better suited to defend the United States during war. Removing tedious decision-making will also bolster national intelligence; the country will flood with notions of further education, supplemental reading, and literacy initiatives once Americans reclaim pure and uncluttered minds. Parents will devote extra hours to fostering an awareness

about liberal arts and natural sciences, and children's aptitude and standardized test scores will improve. No longer will consumers have to fret over which reality television show to record or ponder whether the price of gluten-free crackers is truly justified.

Thirdly, extending the system to protect not only consumers but also companies will deter businesspeople from getting sucked into the vicious cycle of marketing gluttony. A company's goods will be consumed only when the product is necessary, not based on brand preference. It will be a most efficient way to improve inventory control, reduce the number of company employees, eliminate superfluous creativity, and redirect the business toward product functionality.

It is accepted as true that an individual is bombarded with 3,500 to 5,000 marketing messages in one day.¹ This is an assault on humanity and their limits of decision-making. I propose we put an end to the excessive choice available in the American marketplace. Consumers deserve to focus on important activities such as spending time with their families and devoting themselves to prayer and comparable spiritual practices. Death to the practices of bringing goods and services to market! The advantages are manifold and the rewards infinite.

- Inspired by "A Modest Proposal." Jonathan Swift, 1729 -

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¹ J. Walker Smith, president of consumer and marketing watcher Yankelovich, as cited in "Advertisers Forced to Think Way Outside the Box," USA Today.com, Howard, Theresa, 20 Jun 2005.