

# Sustainable Living Programme

2008 edition

## We are 'Shopaholics with Affluenza'! - an introduction to our Shopping theme



Most of the items in our homes have been purchased, and most by us. We make a few items, and grow a few, and receive some as gifts, inheritances or as exchanges - but the majority comes in from our household members' shopping. So what we purchase, and how much, can make a significant difference to the household's environmental impact.

The activity of 'shopping' as a use of leisure time has changed during the past 50 years, so that in New Zealand (as in the USA and UK) it has grown to become the most popular leisure activity outside the home by the 1990s, especially for girls and women, for whom it is firmly ahead of sports participation, walking, gardening and cinema.

### Shopping and the impacts of consumerism

We are *consumers* in the literal dictionary sense - we no longer hunt but we gather and use. And after our use, there is only waste, which is usually carted away unseen.

Ever since the industrial era developed, manufacturers have offered 'new' and 'the latest' as a sales pitch. They aim to make older versions unfashionable, although they are still useable, in order to create a market demand for the new.

As an example, consider how home audio/hi-fi equipment has changed from the 1960s to today.

Many people accumulate large quantities of 'stuff' in their homes and yet still feel dissatisfied, while neighbours, who may have very few material possessions, seem to be content as long as they are well-fed, healthy and warm.

American-born clinical psychologist, John F Schumaker, now a New Zealand resident, wrote (Listener, 20 Nov 2001, page 27): "*various studies have shown that high degrees of materialism have a detrimental effect on psychological and social well-being. A strong materialist orientation has been associated with diminished life satisfaction, impaired self-esteem, dissatisfaction with friendships and leisure activities and a predisposition to depression... Depression has increased tenfold over the past half century.*"

In the USA the average citizen shops for over six hours a week - is your lifestyle similar?



Not everyone is out shopping, of course - in New Zealand, as in many other supposedly 'rich Western' countries, the material gulf between the richest 20%

and the poorest 20% of the population has widened since the 1980s.

Significant numbers of NZ children grow up in unwaged households with such low income that nothing much apart from food and clothing essentials are affordable, whilst other children, perhaps in the same neighbourhood, experience excess consumption.

In North America a condition has been dubbed '**Affluenza**'. This new noun is defined as: "1. *The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses.* 2. *An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American dream.*"

### Do you have Affluenza too?

Try the website:

[www.pbs.or.g/kcts/affluenza/diag/have.html](http://www.pbs.or.g/kcts/affluenza/diag/have.html)

In the USA and Canada, people looking for more from less have started a 'Voluntary Simplicity Movement' promoting lower and more sustainable consumption levels. (Examples include: The Center for a New American Dream [www.newdream.org/](http://www.newdream.org/); Seeds of Simplicity [www.seedsofsimplicity.org/](http://www.seedsofsimplicity.org/); and the Simple Living Network [www.simpleliving.net/](http://www.simpleliving.net/) which includes extensive book lists - beware that 'urge to shop' arriving...Use libraries!)

### Consumer choices

Whenever we buy goods we make choices and show our preferences.

How much are you subconsciously driven by advertising, in your shopping choices?

Why do you select what you buy from the choices available, and where you usually go to shop? Do you know what sub-consciously informs your shopping 'habits'? It's a good discussion-starter.

The commercial world has great interest in these questions and invests huge sums in both marketing research and advertising, trying to influence our 'consumer choices'. When you next see television or print advertising, notice when firms are:

- **building 'demand' for the type of product** e.g. advertisements promoting large four wheel drive 'sport utility' vehicles to wealthier city residents who may yearn for the NZ outdoors but are actually too busy earning in the city to experience much time in the countryside, and rarely go 'off-road'
- **establishing an identifiable brand name** for product ranges, e.g. a particular shoe and clothing brand seeks close association with winning sports people
- **repetitively promoting a named retailer** for its 'bargains' on price or its convenient location and large range of goods, so that you are persuaded to *start* your shopping trip there, rather than with its competitor
- **directing your attention at the 'point of sale'**, with special offers, key facts, bold colour displays, (e.g. 'one previous careful owner', 'today's special').

The cost of all this advertising has to be reclaimed from customers, either in high unit sale price (as with luxury European car imports) or in a greater volume of sales (as with inexpensive plastic items imported from China and Taiwan).

So, what criteria are you aware of using, when making those shopping choices?

*If you have not already tried it, pause at this point to consider the activity sheet "Shopping Product Choices" to see which criteria you are consciously or subconsciously using, and then read on.*

An interesting web directory of NZ small business offering services and products with claims to sustainability is [www.greenlist.co.nz](http://www.greenlist.co.nz)

Hamilton City Council's *Shopping – A household guide to making informed consumer choice for your health and the environment* is at [www.hcc.govt.nz](http://www.hcc.govt.nz)

**Escaping television's incessant sales messages**

How could advertising be affecting your household's shopping choices? In particular, how much does commercial television advertising contribute?

You might have seen over 10,000 TV commercials in a year! You would probably recognise more corporate logos than native plants and birds.

The story is worse for children. The Centre for a New American Dream estimates the average American child spends a daily average of 4 hours and 40 minutes in front of a screen of some kind - two & 1/2 hours of which watching television. On that basis, the child sees at least 55 commercials per day.

But is this what kids want? Not if respondents to a competition the Centre ran is to be believed. Answering the question "What Do Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy?", most replied "love," "happiness," "peace on earth," and "friends." Significant numbers of children also wanted time with family, a clean environment, a world where people treat each other with respect, a chance to see lost loved ones, help for suffering people, health, & time to play. (<http://www.newdream.org/kids/facts.php>)

Is it surprising that it is common for young people to measure their worth by what they have, and feel depressed if they don't have what their richer peers display? Other symptoms of materialism, fed by being exposed to so

much exhortation to shop (according to psychologist John Shumaker) are: "chronic boredom, ennui, jadedness, purposelessness, alienation. 40% of Americans seeking psychotherapy today suffer from these sorts of symptoms."

A survey in NZ found lower levels of TV viewing than the USA figures. It was interesting to note that the lowest adult television viewing levels were associated with highest adult income levels, which included people leading the firms that successfully sell us all this stuff. In May 1999, those earning over \$60,000 per year viewed less than 1.5 hours per day on average, (from an A C Nielsen survey quoted in *North and South* magazine, Aug 1999).

But wait, the situation is only going to get worse. If you thought you were safe from Big Brother, you've got another challenge coming. Spy TV, or digital interactive television, has the potential to track our television viewing, and ultimately even our movements in the home (to the fridge?) in response to viewing an advert, if the convergence of electronics and appliances rolls out as anticipated. While companies like Nielsen monitor our viewing habits using a cohort of volunteers, potentially every viewer of interactive TV could be mined for information: not only by following the 'click stream' as they punch the remote to move from programme to programme, but also by answering questions using the interactive functionality of the remote. ([http://www.whitedot.org/issue/iss\\_story.asp?slug=shortSpyTV](http://www.whitedot.org/issue/iss_story.asp?slug=shortSpyTV))

Many alternative pastimes to television are available and not always at large expense. Examples are:

- reading library books, magazines (that also contain and are often dependent on advertising),
- sports, table-top games,
- computer activities (but beware online advertising and spyware that tracks your keyboard clicks

while surfing the internet. Remove those using programmes such as *Norton Internet Security* or *Spyware Doctor*,

- clubs, cooking, sewing, crafts, fishing, gardening, care of pets, walking...

So how can you insulate yourself from the onslaught of modern media? As long as people are prepared to accept 'free to air' TV, there will always be TV commercials. As long as we want a morning paper that costs only a dollar, there will always be press ads. We 'pay' through the pressure to buy that is on us, and on those people (e.g. children) who influence us on a daily basis.

Advertising is a billion dollar business – in America, more than \$2000 is spent on advertising to every household annually. How can any person shield themselves from that sort of campaign expenditure? Maybe if someone put a "No circulars please" sign on their mailbox, and refused to watch TV, listen to commercial radio, read local papers, use the Internet or drive on any main road they might get away with only a mild dose of affluenza. However, as we all know, viruses are spread by word of mouth, which is also the most effective means of advertising, so you would also need to live in a community that didn't have any of those media. Unless you are about to join a closed religious community you will have to rely on becoming a critical consumer, someone who is not as often taken in by the sales pressures – our materials and evening class discussion may help you a little!

**"Be the change you want to see in the world."**  
Mahatma Gandhi

"Be the change that you want to see in the World" A 2008 book 'Change the World for 15 bucks' reminded us that we are what we do. USA site here: <http://www.wearewhatwedo.org/>

See some 'anti-advertisements', for fun! (Buy Nothing Day - last weekend in November ) <http://adbusters.org/metast/eco/bnd/view.php?id=315>

Read more about actions that may change your shopping habits, to care better for the planet, at [www.sustainableliving.org.nz](http://www.sustainableliving.org.nz)

If you want to reduce what you have by freely giving it to others, then investigate the *freecycle* or *slow living* movements, which also make use of the web.

A site directing gifts of surplus or used items to schools and community groups is DonateNZ <http://www.donatenz.com/>

In Christchurch the [www.recyclingplus.org.nz](http://www.recyclingplus.org.nz) site helps to re-home items that are too useful to throw away.