

'Tis the Season

Black Friday and cyber Monday have kicked off a manic month of holiday shopping, with its seasonal flood of commercials, catalogs, pop-ups and newspaper inserts. But there's a particular desperation this year. With the economy, the future of retail, and possibly our own happiness at stake, I offer some humble suggestions on how to vote with your dollars...Mass market retailers like Walmart, Target, and Best Buy are battling mightily with Amazon, eBay, and the forces of online commerce for nothing less than the future of our consumption. And the future of our economic recovery seems to depend on returning to our previous peaks of consumer confidence and spending.

It's a good time to reflect on how our individual actions shape our fate. Collectively, in what we buy, where we buy it, how we enjoy it, and who benefits, we shape the direction of innovation in our local and national economies.

Our country was deeply divided in the recent elections, when nothing less than the fate of our nation hinged on the choices we made. Imagine treating the holiday season - the period that determines the performance of most retailers and many companies (and the bonuses of their managers) - as seriously as we just treated those elections.

Who Wins?

Imagine keeping our kids up until midnight on Christmas Eve as the results come in from across the country: Did mass market retail win, or was it e-commerce? And what of our local stores?

This holiday season, vote with your dollars. You may even find shopping a more satisfying experience.

Consider the following: Since 1950, our average income has doubled and our gross domestic product has tripled, yet our sense of well-being has remained essentially flat. Worse, as Ed Diener and Martin Seligman found, our "ill-being" measures have risen dramatically:

Depression rates have increased 10-fold over the same 50-year period, and rates of anxiety are also rising ([Twenge, 2000](#)). Indeed, Twenge reported that the average American child in the 1980s reported greater anxiety than the average child receiving psychiatric treatment in the 1950s.

Moreover, the sense of social connectedness is decreasing, as measured by declining levels of trust in other people and in government and, I would add, a decreasing sense of empathy. Witness [one shopper's rationale](#) for crossing a line of Walmart employees protesting temporary jobs, low wages, and lack of health benefits:

Walmart cuts hours and benefits to push people out," said Tammy, using her phone to capture video of the protest. "It's the same thing at Walgreens. The workers are suffering while billionaires make all the money?"

'You gotta go where the sales are,' Tammy said. 'Today at Walgreens every toy was half off. I had to work a 12-hour shift, and they didn't pay me enough. But I can't tell shoppers, 'Don't come in.' I'd lose my job.'

We have more than ever before, yet feel worse. More importantly, we feel disconnected from each other and disenfranchised from the very system on which we depend for our livelihood and our stuff.

Vote With Your Dollars

So what to do about it?

We can vote. Buying the lowest-priced products from the lowest-priced retailers sends a powerful signal in the market - driving producers and retailers to cut product quality and worker safety (the most recent evidence: [the Bangladeshi fire and the role of Walmart, Disney, and Sears](#)) and move manufacturing overseas.

In the holiday spirit, I humbly offer three small steps that help keep our values in mind when we vote with our dollars.

Buy long. Buy one gift that will be passed along to the next generation: a nice pen, watch, hand tool, book, bag, or photo album. It's a good measure of quality and craftsmanship, and it's helped me appreciate what's lost in the products of our disposable culture. My grandfather's monkey wrench, which he inherited too, now sits mainly on my desk but it gives a sense of connection I could never find in the aisles of Home Depot. I buy tools with the hope they will have the same worth one day.

Buy local. Buy at least one gift from a local vendor, artisan, chef, artist, photographer or musician. Talk to them. Learn the stories behind them and their work - like where the wood came from (in this case, urban storm-blown trees turned into a piano stool), or how business is doing (tough in this economy), and how they got into this work in the first place (a philosophy major turned cabinet-maker).

In addition to the sense of connectedness it provides, buying local has real economic benefits. Studies show a strong multiplier effect. Vermont, for instance, found that substituting local production for only 10 percent of the food they imported (around \$181 million worth) would result in "\$376 million in new economic output, including \$69 million in personal earnings from 3, 616 new jobs."

A British study found that £10 spent locally ultimately generates £25 for the local economy, compared to only £14 when spent at a supermarket."

Give back. Challenge yourself and your family to give back as much as you get. Trade a coat for a coat, or a book for a book. Or resurrect Boxing Day, the traditional day after Christmas when people gave to those less fortunate.

Giving invokes gratitude, and grateful people are "happier, less depressed, less stressed, and more satisfied with their lives and social relationships." In other words, it's the perfect antidote for the season of buying.

Happy holidays

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