



October 2007

Eight reasons why you should take ethical consumption more seriously...

Ethical consumption is a trend that cannot be ignored. Don't make the mistake of thinking it is a fad.

article by Dr Graeme Codrington

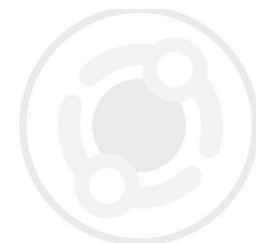


Article at a glance

We live in a surplus society, where companies are selling very similar products at about the same price and quality to the same customers. Consumers are now spoilt for choice, and, they are free to use additional, ethical criteria for making their choice between competing options. Graeme provides solutions to companies struggling with this important issue and he provides eight reasons why ethical consumption is not going to go away. Read on to find out why.

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Today's consumers are not just looking for a good product at a fair price. They are looking beyond the product or service to the ethics of the company that supplies it. The symptoms of this shift in focus by consumers is evident in the concerns that these customers have about the companies they purchase from. There is growing interest, for example, in labour practices, diversity quotas, environmental policies, social responsibility, and even CEO salaries are under scrutiny.

So-called 'triple bottom line reporting', which gets companies to present not just financial results, but also social and environmental results and impact too, is one way in which corporates are trying to respond. And they need to respond because customers are voicing their concerns, in everything from boycotting stores to suing corporations. Companies like Ford, Gap, Nike, Walmart and KfC have all experienced the wrath of ethical consumers in recent years, and have been forced to respond quickly to protect their reputations and their very existence as companies.

This growing emphasis on ethical consumption is a trend that cannot be ignored. It is not going to go away. There are some important changes in the world that provide indications that ethical consumers will continue to be a growing force in the next few decades. Companies would do well to understand this trend, and be proactive in dealing with it.

Ethical consumption is taking off:

No 1. Because we have options

In a surplus society, where companies are selling very similar products at about the same price and quality to the same customers, consumers are now spoilt for choice. And, they are free to use additional, ethical criteria for making their choice between competing options. This is not just true in America or the suburbs of the developed world. The supermarket shelves in rural Africa, for example, also increasingly offer more choice than ever before in history. This is the legacy of a post-industrial and globalised world.

No 2. Because it costs us very little

If we choose not to buy one company's shoes, it doesn't mean we have to walk around barefoot - there are at least 20 other world class manufacturers available to choose from. The same is true in every product category. In this sense, being ethical does not require anyone to give up much.

No 3. Because everyone else is doing it

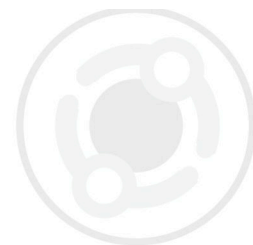
There is a growing peer pressure to become more ethical conscious in our consumption. Test this statement out by announcing at your next social function that 'I don't believe in recycling', or 'Who cares if my shoes were made in a sweatshop, those Bangladeshis should be grateful for their jobs.'



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See what reaction you get! It has become a symbol of your involvement in society to take ethical issues seriously.

There are certainly different levels of ethical consumption - with some people being highly values driven, while others are simply getting on a socially acceptable bandwagon. While some of the hardened activists may be appalled at the 'johnny-come-lately' crowd, it doesn't change the fact that there is a growing band of ethical consumers that need to be taking seriously.

No 4. Because we have the information, we need to do it

It is now easier than ever before to be ethical. The Internet, media and even glossy women's magazines are sources of endless information on companies and where and how products and services are generated. Blogs and consumer hotlines are also helping individuals who have had bad experiences or who have important inside information to get instant global exposure. Exposing unethical behaviour and practices is a guaranteed headline for journalists, so companies are under more scrutiny than ever before.

Again, we may want to question the motives of the people providing all of this information, but that does not change the fact that the information is available, and that ethical consumers are accessing it. When last did you google your company's name? When last did you check the web to see what people are saying about you and your products and services?

No 5. Because it's the right thing to do

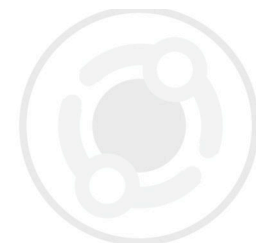
Of course, ethical consumption is more than just a new consumer fad. It is not just this season's in-thing. The reason that people are becoming ethical consumers is because they understand, even if only instinctively, that we are over utilizing - in many cases, even abusing - the planet's resources. We know that this cannot be sustained, and we know that we have to do something about it. We can no longer claim ignorance about issues like global warming, devastation of natural environments, abuse of workers and the like. And once we acknowledge that these are indeed issues, then we must respond.

No 6. Because we have to

The UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, in his address to the Labour Party Conference in September 2007, said, 'The planet is on loan to us from future generations'. This elegant phrase sums up the imperative for action on ethical issues. We have no choice in the matter.

Whatever we decide to do - or not to do - in the next two decades will have a significant impact on the lives of our children and grandchildren. And they will look us in the eye, and ask us what we did at the start of the century, and why we did it. The results of our current decisions and actions will be evident within our own lifetime.

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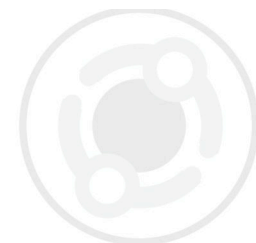
No 7. Because we are the first generation to truly know what will happen if we don't

In centuries past, people lived in vague fear that some divine cataclysm might bring the world to an end. The fear was real, but it was also vague and undefined. Today, we know for certain that as human beings, we can destroy the planet that gives us life. Be it through nuclear holocaust, biological warfare, environmental collapse, superbug epidemics or a slow poisoning of the earth, we are the first generation to have the power to destroy all life. We also have the scientific data to know the outcome and impact of our actions on the planet. While there is some debate about the severity and various regional scenarios, there is no-one who believes that we are not capable of bringing a cataclysm on ourselves. We therefore have a growing imperative to act ethically and sustainably. The rise of the ethical consumer is just one symptom of this obligation to future generations.

No 8. Because we can!!

The ability to choose, and to do so rationally and with self-awareness, is at the heart of what it means to be human. Ethical consumers are using the power of their wallets to make a difference.

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