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Chapters And Verse

Shop Till The Economy Drops

Why do we do it? What triggers the “I must have that now” response? Paco Underhill, retail anthropologist and author of *Why We Buy, The Science of Shopping*, says the entire economy would collapse if we bought only what we needed and said no to the unnecessary.

Shopping has become entertainment, quality time together as a family and sport for the bargain hunter and gold card shopaholic alike.

Shopping, Underhill believes, is about reward, revenge, bribery, therapy, and for some, it can even be a substitution for sex! He concludes that consuming is reflective of the changing status of the modern human being.

“I think we are how we shop,” he says, “And we are how we perform in public.” It echoes what the Dalai Lama reportedly once said: “Shopping is the museum of the twentieth century”.

Our consuming habits and patterns offer both insight into and a running tally of what our culture considers important. And that’s why the psychology of the sale is so crucial to today’s hot economy.

In a segment called “The Butt Brush Effect”, Underhill’s research shows that people – especially women --do not want to touch other shoppers – they want space to stand back and look. So narrow aisles can mean lost customers.

As for men, they apparently, shop the way they drive – they won’t ask for directions, they like to get their information firsthand from labels, and, declares Paco, “for a man, ignoring the price tag is almost a measure of his virility.”

In any store, the front door is not the best place to display goods because customers need a “landing strip”. Baskets shouldn’t be at the entrance to a bookstore because, psychologically we only came in to buy one book. But by the time we have an armful and we’re headed for the bestsellers table, we’re in need and baskets should be strategically scattered around. Underhill

has also found that a greeter at the entrance – a la The Gap or WalMart – significantly reduces shoplifting because once we've made human contact, any theft would be personal. And shopping turn-offs include harsh lighting, pulsating music, antiseptic white, pushy salesclerks, poor signage, and cramped spaces that can create the dreaded butt brush effect.

But price still matters, particularly for women shoppers because, says Paco, "women go into a store – especially a supermarket – with the idea that they are spending the family's money while men go in thinking they are spending their own money." Women take lists. Men don't, so they buy more stuff, especially if they have children with them. In fact, 60 to 70 per cent of what hits our shopping basket, we had no intention of buying when we walked in.

Still, it's really women that matter when trying to figure out what sells where and why. We love to spend but we have rules and standards and often lack of time, as opposed to price is a determining factor.

"Women are capable of causing a tectonic shift in the world of shopping." He says. "It is still, and always will be, mostly for females."

That's why places like Restoration Hardware are so successful. No grizzled old guy with nails in jars catering to men, but there are plenty of designer hammers and gardening tools.

In fact, one of the most interesting points Underhill uncovers is that the social stratification of retail is over. The same woman who shops at the Bay in the morning is at Costco in the afternoon.

And then there's the fickle "tweens", the 2.4 million Canadian kids between the ages of nine and fourteen who control \$1.6 billion in income.

Three quarters say they are consulted by parents on major purchases like computers and cars and even parents concede kids influence more than 80% of decisions.

The other wild card is the Internet. E-commerce operations are desperately trying to figure out what sells online before they go broke trying.

"If we look at what's selling on the Web right now, it is where the relationship between manufacturer and bricks and mortar has failed: film, books, music, stocks and porn. That represents 80 per cent of the transactions over the Web."

The Internet will be a parallel experience where it will act as a search engine for those who, for a variety of reasons, are inadequately served by bricks and mortar stores.

But if we let our fingers do the walking online, it will mean fewer stores. Underhill already believes we are over-stored by 20 to 30% and that one third of the brands we know will disappear.

And even though the big box stores seem to be all the rage, Underhill predicts stores will shrink as we purchase more staples in quantity. After all, the shelf life of Tide is seven years!

Back in the 50's a book called *The Hidden Persuaders* offered a radical look at the consumer society, which was still a new phenomenon then. The insights into the power of advertising held up twenty years later when it was assigned reading in my university psychology course. I have a feeling that Underhill's book, just released this week in paperback, will also be worth a look twenty years from now as we try to make sense of the radical transformation of our economy.