Book Reviews

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In this issue:

Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things
by Donald A. Norman (New York: Basic Books, 2004, 287 pp., $26.00)

In his famous book *The Design of Everyday Things* (1998), Donald Norman argues for the primacy of functionality over other considerations. Conversely, in his sequel *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*, Norman asserts that the emotional side of design may be more critical to a product's success than its practical elements. His fundamental thesis is that attractive products work better. He contends that beautifully designed products make people feel good, which in turn puts people in an open frame of mind to be creative and find solutions to the problems they face. This viewpoint is gaining a lot of acceptance in the business world; for example, Postrel (2004) similarly argues that the "look and feel" of people, places, and things are more important than we think.

At a fundamental level, Norman contends that emotion and cognition work in tandem as consumers relate to products. This idea fits in well with the state-of-the-art literature in cognitive science that shows that emotions are inseparable from and a necessary part of cognition. Beyond the functionality issues, accommodating aesthetic elements that appeal to the emotions is extremely critical in the development of a "user-centric" design. Norman's recommendation that a good product design must accommodate both affective and cognitive approaches is well founded.

Norman suggests that there are three levels of design: The first is the "visceral" level, which embodies the sensory aspects about how things look, feel, smell, and sound. Visceral design elicits immediate and powerful responses that are involuntary and subconscious. Viscerally well-designed products tend to evoke positive emotions in the consumers. Second is the “behavioral” level, at which users form their perceptions of a particular product through use. Product performance is paramount, and thus designers must ensure that the product is easy to use and that the functionality of the product is easily decipherable. Norman suggests that good behavioral design must be a fundamental part of the design process from the beginning. Third, the “reflective” level is the level at which the product has meaning for consumers; it accounts for how consumers maintain an innate sense of identity through the consumption of the product over time. Marketing plays a large role in incorporating the reflective design elements in a product. The interaction of these three levels of design leads to the culmination of the “emotional design,” a new, holistic approach to designing successful products.

Although Norman does a good job of providing a unified theory of product design by incorporating these three levels, the appeal of catering to consumers’ emotions is not really new to marketers. Similarly, the notion of the reflective design, which states that objects in people’s lives are more than mere material possessions, is also not new to the marketing literature. The idea that “we are what we own” has been well articulated by several consumer behavior scholars. For example, Belk’s (1988) classic article provides evidence of the diminished sense of self that people can experience when prized possessions are lost or stolen. However, the larger point that Norman makes is well taken in that reflective design becomes critical in a competitive marketplace in which opportunities for differentiation on functionality are scarce.

After laying out his unified theory of design, Norman devotes the next few chapters to the practice of design by providing a variety of examples, such as National Football League coaches’ headsets, Diesel clothing stores, Swatch watches, and an Alessi tea strainer. These examples add to the book by providing a concrete demonstration of his design principles. However, there is one glaring omission in these chapters. Although Norman talks about the design aspects of incremental innovations, calling them enhancers, he does not elaborate on the challenges of designing radical innovations. Designers can observe the users of incremental innovations, discover usage difficulties, and make appropriate changes to make them work better. However, the design of radical innovations is a different challenge altogether, in which the design is based totally on the vision of the product designers. In addition, the design of radical innovations may have huge positioning implications. For example, the design of TiVo, a radical innovation, is similar to that of a VCR or a DVD player. Could this design have influenced consumers to think of TiVo as an enhanced VCR or DVD player? Could a radically new design farther from the VCRs and DVD players have helped TiVo’s positioning as a truly radical innovation? Some discussion on these aspects would have been invaluable to designers of radical innovations.

These chapters lead to the book’s final section, in which Norman discusses the role of emotional machines and the future of robots. Norman believes that emotions will be an integral part of machine designs in the future so that people may better communicate with these machines. I was particularly fascinated by some of his thoughts in this section. People tend to attribute human qualities to robots that appear human. However, Norman suggests that making a robot humanlike may backfire because people are least accepting of creatures that look human (p. 176). This led me to an intriguing thought--did Sony introduce its AIBO robots, which are shaped like dogs, because these animals appeal to us at a visceral level and also because we are forgiving of robots that are designed to look like pets? If this rationale is indeed correct, the potential of emotional design to create entirely new marketspaces is extraordinary, and therein lies the greater value of Norman’s theory of product design.

In summary, the central premise that a great product can be developed by integrating all three aspects of design is innovative. The book educates designers and suggests that product design is much more than visceral design, as is commonly practiced. The book is well written, has an appropriate mix of academic rigor and practical relevance, and provides much food for thought.

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Building Strong Brands
by David Aaker (New York: The Free Press, 1996, 380 pp. $28)

Brand Leadership
by David Aaker and Eric Joachimsthaler (New York: The Free Press, 2000, 350 pp. $30)

Brand Portfolio Strategy
by David Aaker (New York: The Free Press, 2004, 348 pp. $28)

Whenever an author writes a series of management books in quick succession, it is important to ask the following question: Does each book make a substantial contribution on its own? As I began reviewing the three books *Building Strong Brands*, *Brand Leadership*, and *Brand Portfolio Strategy* by noted marketing professor and branding guru David Aaker (he coauthored *Brand Leadership* with Eric Joachimsthaler), I used this simple yardstick to evaluate the marginal contribution of each book.

An integrative review calls for a comparison of three books to a common set of criteria. In *Brand Leaders*hip, Aaker and Joachimsthaler provide a similar set of criteria to compare traditional brand management and brand leadership. Bandyopadhyay and Serjak (2006) also use a similar scheme to compare and contrast traditional and online brand management. There is a significant overlap between the criteria I use herein and those used in the previously mentioned studies (e.g., focus, perspective, management structure, control of communication). Table 1 lists the criteria and my evaluation of each book against these criteria.

Focus

In general, the focus of *Building Strong Brands* is on a single brand. Although Aaker talks about how to create and manage subbrands within an overall system approach, he concentrates mostly on a single brand. Aaker presents a thorough, lucid description of how to create strong brand identities, develop brand equity measures, and organize brand-building programs. He uses examples of brand building in successful companies, such as General Electric, Saturn, Kodak, and McDonald's, to illustrate how strong brands are created and managed.

In *Brand Leadership*, Aaker and Joachimsthaler make a valid argument that classic brand management is being replaced by what they call the brand leadership model, in which the manager emphasizes both strategy and tactics, and has a broader scope. The focus is not only on short-term sales and profits but also on brand equity measures. Thus, the focus is more on the management of multiple brands than on a single brand.

The focus of *Brand Portfolio Strategy* is also on multiple brands, but within the framework of a brand portfolio. This brand portfolio model emphasizes the relationship between brands and seeks opportunities to leverage the strength of one brand to project another. The basic premise of this model is that brands are not mutually exclusive but are part of a well-designed portfolio of brands.

Perspective
In *Building Strong Brands*, Aaker discusses practical management issues and introduces a set of brand equity measures to help managers evaluate and track brand equity across products and markets. Thus, the book is quite practical from a tactical point of view. For example, it provides a tool for a brand manager to develop his or her own brand equity measures and a unique identity for the brand. In other words, the book provides many take-aways for the practicing brand manager.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of this book involves Aaker's suggestion to go beyond the brand-as-attributes concept to embrace brand-as-organization, brand-as-person, and brand-as-symbol perspectives as well. The brand-as-organization perspective focuses on the associations of the company's people, culture, programs, and values. Such organizational associations are more endearing and more resistant to imitation by other companies than product attributes. The brand-as-person perspective focuses on the brand personality, which can make a brand more interesting and personalized. Aaker believes (p. 142) that "a brand without a personality, not unlike a person, lacks friends and may be easily overlooked." The brand-as-symbol perspective focuses on a strong symbol that can provide cohesion and structure to the brand identity, thus increasing brand recognition and brand recall.

In *Brand Leadership*, the brand manager takes the leadership position in planning and implementing the business strategy. According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (p. 7), "the brand strategy should be influenced by the business strategy and should reflect the same strategic vision and corporate culture." In other words, managers must ensure that their strategies are in sync with the company mission. Similar to *Brand Leadership*, the perspective of *Brand Portfolio Strategy* is also strategic in nature.

Country Scope
Because brand management is the principal focus of *Building Strong Brands*, the brand manager typically is responsible for the entire management of the brand in one country. Managing a brand across countries requires a new set of skills, such as cross-cultural awareness and knowledge about the channel structure, legal structure, and the demographics of each country. Thus, a brand manager with a tactical flair in only one country may not be suitable for the task.

The brand leadership model, as espoused in *Brand Leadership*, takes a global perspective. A global perspective involves not only global branding issues but also manufacturing, outsourcing, and research and development. A "brand architecture" is particularly suitable for this perspective. Brand architecture is a framework that identifies all the brands that are to be supported; their respective roles; and, more importantly, their relationship with one another.

The brand portfolio strategy also has a global component. The portfolio concept is particularly suitable for brand alliances (e.g., Star Alliance of air carriers), which are quite common in global business. A key component of the brand portfolio strategy is defining the brand scope. For what categories can the brand play a role? Is a new brand required to support a new product-market, such as an international market? If it is found that a brand alliance is more suitable than a brand extension for the global market, the brand portfolio strategy is compatible with such as a scenario. However, Aaker and Joachimsthaler have not explicitly recommended a global brand alliance strategy in their brand leadership model.

Management Structure
Because of the tactical orientation of the model developed in *Building Strong Brands*, this book is more suitable for a mid-level brand manager. Although the concepts of brand equity and brand

identity are universal and relevant to managers at the mid- and upper levels, the book offers guidelines and tools that are of practical significance to a mid-level brand manager.

The brand leadership model focuses more on the strategic aspect of brand management. Thus, the manager must come from the upper echelons of corporate hierarchy because the task requires coordination between a multitude of people and organizations. The manager who is responsible for this position is often the “top honcho” in the marketing division.

The implementation of the brand portfolio strategy also requires a manager at the top-most position of the marketing organization structure. The person should be responsible for designing the brand portfolio, setting roles for the portfolio and the individual brands, defining the scope of the brand (i.e., the relevance of each brand to a given product category), and formalizing the portfolio. Thus, the manager should be near the top in the marketing division hierarchy. This position is akin to the category manager position that is prevalent in many multiproduct multibrand companies (for more details on category management, see, e.g., Bandyopadhyay and Divakar 1999; Zenor 1994). For example, a category manager oversees all shampoo brands (e.g., Pert Plus, Pantene, Head & Shoulders, Vidal Sassoon) for Procter & Gamble. The category manger ensures that each brand has a unique positioning and that all brands follow a coordinated promotion strategy, thus minimizing promotional inefficiency and the possibility of brand cannibalism.

Control of Communication

The model in *Building Strong Brands* is designed in such as a way that the brand manager makes most of the brand communication decisions. In addition, the communication is mostly geared toward the consumer because customer relationship building is a key ingredient in this model. The brand leadership model and the brand portfolio strategy are designed for both external and internal communication. Although it is important to inform and persuade the consumer about product benefits, it is perhaps equally important to communicate internally to the key people in the organization to ensure complete convergence in strategic outlook. In the brand leadership model, the control of communication essentially rests with the brand leader. According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (p. 12), a brand manager in the brand leadership model needs to be “a strategist and communication team leader directing the use of a wide assortment of vehicles, including sponsorships, the Web, direct marketing, publicity, and promotions.”

The brand manager in the brand portfolio strategy has similar responsibilities as the manager in the brand leadership model, but the perspective is somewhat different. The portfolio approach requires that the portfolio graphics (i.e., logo and visual representation) are well coordinated. The selection of the logo and its dimension, color, and layout can be used to make a statement about the brand and its relationship to other related brands. Aaker illustrates how Mariott uses portfolio graphics to signal the relative driver role of a group of brands. For example, Mariott’s endorsement of the Courtyard Inn is visually larger and stronger than its endorsement of the more downscale Fairfield Inn.

Opportunity of Brand Leveraging

Leveraging a brand involves building a strong brand platform in the core market and then extending the brand into other markets. It may involve brand extensions to a new product-market or a vertical line extension that moves the brand upscale or downscale in the same market. In *Building Strong Brands*, Aaker talks about a system approach in brand management, but the focus is always on a single brand. This restricts the opportunity of brand leveraging even on a dominant brand such as Coke or McDonald’s. Although scope for brand extension and line extension is always there, it is limited. There is also the risk of hurting the dominant brand if the extension goes awry.

The brand portfolio strategy provides the best opportunity for brand leveraging. Aaker suggests

(p. 12) that it provides “a structure and process to create brand extension opportunities, assess their risks and adjust the portfolio accordingly.” A portfolio strategy helps identify and evaluate risks of a possible extension both vertically and horizontally.

In addition, the brand portfolio management must consider not only the current scope of the brand but also the future opportunities. Brands should be leveraged as part of a long-term plan that outlines the ultimate product scope, the sequence that will take it to the destination, and the associations that are necessary to be successful. This focus on the future distinguishes the brand architecture concept proposed in the brand leadership model and the brand portfolio strategy.

Summary
Overall, I believe that *Building Strong Brands* is suitable for the mid- to upper-level brand manager. It provides the manager with a tactical perspective on how to manage a brand. Aaker explains the concept of brand equity clearly and outlines measures of brand equity. In addition, Aaker urges the brand manager to expand his or her perception of the brand. The ideas of brand as organization, brand as person, and brand as symbol are espoused in addition to the traditional brand-as-product perspective.

There is little difference between *Brand Leadership* and *Brand Portfolio Strategy*. Indeed, Aaker acknowledges the same in the preface of *Brand Portfolio Strategy*. In his words (p. xv), “brand architecture [the term used in *Brand Leadership*] was an opaque concept for some, though, and for others suggested the more limited problem of naming brands and developing logos. Thus, in this book a new label, brand portfolio strategy, is used. It is more holistic, strategic, and compatible with the book’s thrust—how to optimize and leverage a brand portfolio to enhance and enable business strategy.”

However, I believe that the brand portfolio strategy is an improvement over the brand architecture model because of its emphasis on the scope of the brand, especially the future scope of the brand. This makes the brand portfolio strategy somewhat stronger than the brand architecture model. If the potential reader has budget and/or time constraints, I suggest reading *Brand Portfolio Strategy* instead of *Brand Leadership*. There is hardly any concept in *Brand Leadership* that is not covered in *Brand Portfolio Strategy*. I suggest that brand managers also read *Building Strong Brands* because it provides the tools to measure brand equity and offers ideas to treat the brand as more than a “bundle of benefits.”

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Consumption, Happiness, and Marketing: A Review of Antimarketing Books

A clutch of books published over the past three decades appears to present an antimarketing argument. Several prominent economists and psychologists have examined the predominant way of life in consumer societies and have some surprising, some worrying, and some inspiring things to say about the acquisition of goods and the use of services in the developed parts of the world. This is a review of some of the more significant of these books. The question is, Why should marketing academics engage with these analyses? All the books under consideration highlight a misguided pursuit of fulfilment through material acquisition and the transformation of the civil citizen into a self-centered consumer.

Why are such critiques problematic for the marketing discipline? The authors suggest that in supposedly neutrally serving materialism and consumerism, managerial micromarketing is not helping people be happier, even though this is primarily what is promised. The main idea running throughout these works is that despite a gargantuan industry that teaches and trains marketing managers, people are joyless, discontent, unhappy customers whose quality of life is declining, whose social welfare is eroding, and whose physical habitat is being depleted and destroyed. The best efforts of marketing technology notwithstanding, people have hit the social limits of the ideology of consumption. How can marketers respond to such withering blows? What can and should marketers do in recognition of the cultural, social, ecological, and economic consequences of large-scale marketing systems?

I review the books in chronological order based on publication date, though I did not read them in this sequence. All but one were written in the North American context, primarily by economists. Two were written by psychologists, and the other two were written by laymen consumers (or is that citizens?). In essence, the metatheme is consumption. The question raised is, What good are the goods people acquire and use? Are marketers to blame for any waste that ensues?

Dissatisfied Consumers

In scrutinizing the "joyless economy," psychologist Tibor Scitovsky (1976, 1992) challenges much of the standard explanation of buying motivation and satisfaction and the associated decision process as examined in the consumer behavior literature. He points out that the economist's theory of rational consumer behavior completely overlooks pleasure. The economic view is that higher spending produces more satisfaction, but there is evidence to the contrary. Most survey data suggest that though economic welfare has undoubtedly risen, people are not happier as a result. The question then is, How essential is this escalating consumption to happiness? For Scitovsky, the answer lies in understanding and explaining comfort rather than satisfaction. For example, North Americans acquire and pay for more comfort than is necessary for "a good life." Scitovsky explains that the desire for satisfaction is not the only motivation of consumption behavior. People are driven by the desire to relieve discomfort and for stimulation to relieve boredom. The main scope for choosing between pleasure and comfort in an affluent society is stimulation. Ironically, the pleasures of want satisfaction are crowded out by affluence (i.e., comfort). Scitovsky wonders when status seeking and conspicuous consumption benefit society. He also importantly emphasizes that the North American lifestyle (on which many model their expectations for their own lives) is very expensive in terms of energy and exhaustible resources.

Goods and services are socially determined as necessities and luxuries. Necessities serve biological functions for the satiable avoidance of pain. The consumption motive is comfort, and the result is the satisfaction of a need. Luxuries are everything else. The motive is the stimulation that satisfies wants, but pleasure seeking is insatiable. Thus, according to Scitovsky, much of people's consumption is in pursuit of status, that is, to gain and assert membership of a society.

Comfort is achieved when the level of arousal is at or near optimum. Pleasure accompanies changes in this level, and therefore satisfaction of a need provides pleasure and comfort. Thus, complete and continuous comfort is incompatible with pleasure. A choice must be made: A person can have pleasure with some sacrifice of comfort or comfort with the giving up of some pleasure. When comfort (i.e., the absence of pain and pleasure) is gained, pleasure is lost, and there is usually the regretful awareness of the loss. What motivates the choice is either comfort or pleasure. Increased affluence leads to the increased preference for comfort, but the price is the loss of pleasure.

Satisfaction of a want eliminates a discomfort, the initial presence of which is a necessary condition of pleasure. In contrast, stimulation eliminates the discomfort of boredom, but the condition of deriving pleasure is the discomfort of the temporary strain it creates. The pleasures of stimulation are more likely to win over comfort than are satisfaction of wants because there is greater scope for free and rational choice. Too much of a good thing can be a bad thing. In the "golden mean" lies the most pleasant experience, that is, between the extremes of too little and too much. Too much comfort may preclude pleasure.

Scitovsky notes that people take for granted the good things of life and become addicted to them. At one time, a proud self-image was that of the sovereign consumer basking in a free-enterprise economy with freedom of choice to pursue his or her own personal tastes independently, thus determining what is produced and what is not. Consumers in Scitovsky's context (i.e., the United States of the 1970s) view themselves as helpless, oppressed, harassed, and cheated in an age of conformity to mass production. Society is an unhealthy plutocracy in which those who have more money have more influence and those who have less money must conform to what others want; this is the rule of modern capitalism. Tastes are well catered to if a person is willing to conform. Could it be that people desire satisfaction in the wrong things and in the wrong way and are then dissatisfied with the outcome? Is it those who offer the advantages who are to blame for the drawbacks? Still, people want to retain the benefits, so they seek a remedy in greater control over producers and their relationship with consumers; in others words, it is marketers who are at fault, not the consumers.

By contrasting the analyses of economists with those of psychologists, Scitovsky shows the conflict between what people choose to acquire and what will best satisfy them. It is assumed that rational consumers know what they are doing, do what is best for them, and do the best they can, and the job of the economy is to deliver what consumers want. However, Scitovsky argues that this conceptualization overlooks that tastes are highly variable, easily influenced, and modified by price changes and availability of alternatives. It also overlooks that what modifies tastes may also modify the ability to derive satisfaction from things. Furthermore, both consumers and producers benefit from the other conforming to their wishes, but producers have far more power and influence than consumers. Harmony in the marketplace is derived through the informing actions of competitors and buyers and sellers. However, most of the conforming is done by those whose behavior is most flexible. Is adaptation of consumers' tastes to the rigid requirements of the productive system a cause for celebration?

Scitovsky's discussion makes the reader pause and think about the economy's contribution to human welfare and consider both economic and noneconomic sources of satisfactions. He points out that most life satisfactions come from outside of the market economy: from nonmarket goods and services, self-sufficiency, mutual stimulation, externalities, and work. Yet people are engulfed daily in a sea of promotional messages that tell them to find satisfactions in purchases. As a result, they miss the realization that the contribution of the economic product (i.e., that which passes through the formal contractual market process) to human welfare "turns out to be small indeed" (Scitovsky 1992, p. 103).

What is perhaps more important is the economy's ability to produce an economic product with a maximum of beneficial effects and a minimum of harmful side effects. In the market, two parties exchange because they prefer what they receive versus what they give. However, many exchanges occur outside of a market, and many unreciprocated acts are satisfying to both giver and receiver. Furthermore, some market exchanges create both satisfactions and the needs they satisfy, and thus they have little or no use. Most stimuli bring external benefits that are sensed by the consumer and others, so enjoyment is often enhanced by sharing. Most comforts have no external benefits, and they generate external nuisances (e.g., noise annoyance, chemical pollution).

Scitovsky also proposes four explanations for people's tendency to self-rate happiness in relation to their material standard of living (money income): satisfaction of status, satisfaction of work, enjoyment of novelty, and addiction. Scitovsky argues that together these explain why happiness depends on ranking in society rather than on absolute income. This is a recurring theme in these books.

The Discontent of Economic Growth

Paul Wachtel uncovers the psychological consequences of a growth-oriented way of life (Wachtel 1989). In this account, there is a sense of deprivation and decline that drives the pursuit of greater economic growth, and this leads to serious harm to the life-sustaining environment. The problem lies not in production, for people can make anything they need and want, but rather in the distribution of goods and services.

A growth-based economy ultimately generates discontent. The prevailing approach to "living the good life" is a quest for abundance, which is ironically self-defeating in that it destroys the environment (i.e., the resources) on which it depends. Wachtel diagnoses basic misleading assumptions about the individualistic consumerist way of life in North America. People have lost track of what they really need: psychological well-being in terms of social ties, openness to experience, and personal growth. In economic terms, well-being is calculated on quantity of production and the accumulation of outputs.

What are the underlying sources of discontent? For Wachtel, it is citizens as consumers and not only the corporate advertisers that continually generate discontent in a society that overemphasizes growth and the economy, a cult of individualism, and an endless quest for "more." These are self-defeating choices of the consumer society. There are unrecognized realities of consumer life. Third parties to market exchanges are usually powerless to affect them. The contribution of material goods to life satisfaction has diminishing returns, and well-being is wrongly defined in economic terms. People do not need to be more competitive, they need to be clearer about what they have and what they need.

The Problem of Too Much and Too Little

What are the consequences of a consumption-oriented society in which people have too much or too little (Durning 1992)? Today, the terms "consumer" and "person" are used as virtually synonymous terms. Society has shifted in the past century from community as the organizing principle of people's lives to private consumption. Human wants are insatiable, so a consumer society can never keep the promise of fulfilment through material possessions. People gorge on material things while hungering socially, psychologically, and spiritually for family and social relationships and meaningful work and leisure. For many people, consuming is now the primary means of self-definition and leisure pastime activity. In an era when progress is still sought through higher consumption, and the consuming elite are responsible for most of the exhaustion, poisoning, and disfigurement of precious life-sustaining land, water, and air, are people really dying to shop and, in so doing, dying of consumption?

How is it in people's self-interest to waste, pollute, and destroy their habitat? Is concern with the well-being of those beyond “significant others” too much to hope for? For Durning, the answer lies in the idea that groups make choices that no member alone would make. People will take the easier path unless they collectively take the more difficult one.

Writing at the beginning of the 1990s, Durning expresses the conundrum of consumption as follows: There is little agreement on the seriousness of the problem and no apparent solution. It remains morally indefensible to deny developing nations the benefits of increasing consumption and politically impossible to reduce consumption in developed countries. Yet consumption carries a heavy burden of cost on the environment and returns dubious rewards. The myth that the alternative to consuming is decline is perpetuated as needs are cultivated by mass-media advertising.

Durning offers a culture of permanence and sufficiency as the necessary alternative to economic collapse through unsustainable debt and as a way to tame consumerism. Logically, consumption cannot produce fulfillment if human desires are infinitely expandable. Durning believes that consumerism is likely to be a short-lived value system, and he expects to observe lower consumption emerge as an ethical norm. Although progress remains highly desirable, it will not be viewed in terms of more consumption. Consumption will be defined in terms of experience rather than acquisition of objects. Luxury things will once again be considered more of a privilege than a right. For Durning, the postconsumerism era will witness the ascent of the golden rule: Do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you.

The New Consumerism

By the mid-1990s, the “economic progress” of consumerism was worrying some people. They felt driven to acquire and spend money on “wish lists” that did not make them happy. Yet the orgy of overspending and living beyond one’s means is not the consequence of a lack of self-discipline or of advertisers. Harvard economist Juliet Schor (1998) examines the “new consumerism” to try to understand and explain “why we want what we don’t need,” and she finds that spending has become the ultimate social art. Most people seek comfort and consolation in the pleasures and products of shopping as captives in a culture of consumption, yet there is a growing gap between aspiration and resources. In a lifestyle wished for and sought after—for psychological release and stress reduction—shopping has become a form of recreation. Yet people never seem to have enough. Most is conspicuous consumption or competitive acquisition for visibility, position, and emulative behavior (i.e., what people want translates into what people “need”). Lifestyles are escalating through ostentatious, upscale spending. Many consumption goals are unattainable and unaffordable, so the outcome is inevitably dissatisfaction. While people feel powerful in spending and acquiring more, they feel materially dissatisfied and compelled to spend whatever it takes to keep up with a chosen reference group, motivated by a “fear of falling.” People work so that they can spend because they believe that more “stuff” will bring more happiness. The rule for success is simple: Work more to earn more to buy more. This upscaling of desire never urges people to want less.

Consumption continues to increase, and there are numerous imperatives to spend in consumer society; the economy is driven by growth, so the market imperative is bigger, better, and more. People have an ever-expanding list of things they must have, yet the Genuine Progress Indicator and the Index of Social Health are both showing decline. People seek the status of individuality and distinction through products, but at what cost? In being an effective and efficient consumer, people also become socially dysfunctional.

Schor observes that consumption is correlated with the level of educational achievement, so universities may be breeding this urge. Case studies of success inevitably have material wealth on show. There are even class-based consumption norms to be readily observed.

To counter the moral conflicts of excessive spending, Schor suggests “safe spending,” in which postmaterialist citizens attempt to share rather than to own. Market exchange (selling and buying) emphasizes individual gain through ownership, whereas sharing emphasizes efficient use through social interaction. For marketers, the question remains, Does selling lead to buying, or is selling a natural requirement of the drive to acquire? Furthermore, how does buying things produce life satisfaction?

Unhappy Affluence

How do buying and consuming contribute to well-being and ill-being? The political scientist Robert Lane (2000) examines subjective well-being in ten Western European countries and claims that the data show increasing slavery to the “hedonic treadmill” and an epidemic of depression, resulting in a decline in reports of feeling happy (Lane 2000). Lane argues that subjective well-being depends on money income but that money income alone does not buy happiness, and diminishing returns set in when people move above the poverty line into affluence. Then, the good that is most conducive to subjective well-being is not money, job satisfaction, or even a sense of empowerment; it is the enjoyment of warm social relationships. Markets tend to reduce the supply of this unpriced good, thus raising its marginal utility. Lane believes (p. 45) that “people not money (or knowledge) make us happy and sad” and largely blames a deterioration in companionship. He argues that markets are a source of unhappiness because of the materialistic motives on which they rely, the job insecurity they cause, and the way they deprive people of family time. According to Lane, consumer culture is a lonely one, even though people exercise their personal freedom in meeting their personal preferences.

Markets are supposed to satisfy human desires. Money income is a central premise of the market, and indeed, people try to value almost everything in money terms. Lane proposes that the market (as a production system) should be judged on the basis of its capacity to produce happiness and personal development (i.e., a person’s sense of self-esteem and of being in control of his or her own life) through work as a source of lifetime satisfaction.

The trinity of ultimate “goods” in life are subjective well-being, human development (including virtue), and justice; these outcomes provide happiness in terms of life satisfaction. How capable is the chosen marketing system of delivering these? The evidence from the United States is that happiness is declining and that depression is increasing as people pursue materialism in market democracies. Lane examines whether well-being is a market externality and whether democracy is inherently a source of unhappiness. Are people the best judges of their own well-being?

Lane identifies the apparent trade-off between money and companionship and argues for a companionate democracy to supersede the market democracy. Lane identifies the “economistic fallacy,” that beyond the poverty level of subsistence, higher incomes increase subjective well-being. He argues that people are also experiencing the effects of the “titanic conflict” between the oldest and the newest human institutions: the collective family group and the individual personal market. The market undermines the collectivist people-oriented life by focusing attention on objects of desire. The market has the capacity to maximise individualized preference satisfaction or well-being by permitting the personal pursuit of happiness, but the materialistic tendency causes unhappiness by emphasizing the importance of possessions and acquisition to self-interested satisfaction and over well-being.

There seems to be a paradox in that materialists motivated by market rationality pursue wealth, but this has little effect on their well-being. Indeed, people with materialist tendencies also tend toward low life satisfaction; it seems that the “economic man” is destined to lose. At the same time, satisfaction with life influences satisfaction that is derived from consumption. Furthermore, increasing consumption requires more attention to earning and, thus, longer working hours. Capitalism and liberal democracy are justified on the grounds of greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, yet they leave so many dissatisfactions.[1] Hppiness is not synonymous with the satisfaction of preferences.

Marketing, or at least promotional advertising, is professionalized arousal of dissatisfaction and associated appeals to consume now. As consumers, people are encouraged to put themselves before others. Markets create isolation. As society moves from collective activity to increased individual consumption, social interaction declines. The popular idea of economic growth implies and encourages rising expectations. Yet there is also "popular ignorance of the sources of people's own ill-being" (Lane 2000, p. 321) with "self-inspired unhappiness" (p. 301) For Lane, the answer lies in companionship: friendships and good family life outside of the market.

Incentives to Consume

Robert Frank, Cornell professor of economics, ethics, and public policy, urges people to understand their spending patterns and their sources (Frank 2000). He provides considerable evidence that over the recent two decades, there has been a spectacular and uninterrupted rise in luxury consumption. Ordinary, functional goods are no longer acceptable. For example, cars are larger, heavier, and far more expensive. Almost everything offered today is bigger, has more features, is of (arguably) higher quality, and is more expensive than the previous offer. As the super rich set the pace, everyone else spends furiously in a competitive echo of wastefulness. The costs are enormous: People spend more time at work, leaving less time for family and friends and less time for exercise. Most people have been forced to save less and spend and borrow much more. Productivity and income growth are declining. What is the cost of this "luxury"? Are these changing spending patterns an improvement? Frank provides evidence that spending choices are not making people as happy and as healthy as they could. In addition, in the luxury consumption boom, people wanting more of what they want is a wasteful, excessive "luxury fever." The resources that could be used elsewhere (e.g., in the public sphere) are commandeered. Personal savings are declining as debt increases. People spend more time working and less time with companions. Air and water quality, food safety, education, transport, and health care are under pressure. Somehow, people have sacrificed well-being for consumption, even though they believe that the latter is the self-evident means to the desirable former.

Frank takes the "keeping up with the Joneses" idea very seriously, referring to it as a veritable "arms race" in which people value the gains from their conspicuous consumption only in relative terms. There has been huge growth in the income of the highest earners, and others try to emulate their spending choices, even though the real-value earnings of the lowest earners are declining. Frank warns that there are obvious long-term costs associated with the accelerating spiral of buying excess in the status-directed demand for goods and services as symbols of social identity and style. When the threshold of affluence is reached, the average level of human well-being is almost completely independent of material consumption. Is there any useful purpose in accumulating further wealth (as measured by an absolute living standard) in rich countries? Frank asserts that there is not. Further wealth created by enterprise could be spent in certain other ways to improve quality of life.

According to Frank's analysis, people in overdeveloped economies have already fallen into the social trap of being drawn by consumption incentives. Neither foolishness nor greed fuel wasteful luxury spending, but rather what people observe their neighbors buying. This competitive acquisition to achieve relative position in society does not make people as happy or as healthy as they could be. Relative consumption is unchanged, while absolute consumption escalates out of control. There are negative externalities to such habitual behavior; the tragedy of the commons is borne out in daily lives. What is good for one is bad for all. This compulsive and excessive consumption is driven by immoderate wants, by the belief that there can never be legitimate limits and wants.

In society, there are a multitude of competing conceptions of the good life. Happiness is only one goal. According to Frank, the problem is not one of overspending but rather of spending on the wrong things. Why might absolute living standards matter? People might be able to spend their money in other ways that would make them happier. Much of Frank's analysis is to show that and explain why people do not make these choices. Applied measures of subjective well-being may miss other things that matter, such as health, longevity, and so on, even if not happiness. Frank shows that alternative ways of using expendable natural resources can produce the sustained increment in human welfare that people seem to desire and that careful judgment is necessary because spending in some categories matters more than it does in others. Some categories of consumption are inherently "dirty," whereas others are "clean."

Rationally, people would choose fewer things and closer social ties. This promotes health and subjective well-being. However, at least in the United States, the opposite is the case. Does money buy happiness? It depends on what people spend it on. Less conscious consumption can result in healthier, longer, more satisfying lives. So why have people not changed their spending patterns to bring this about? Some forms of inconspicuous consumption have actually declined. Why do people buy things that do not best serve their interests? Is this about powerful corporate manipulation? Is there some other plausible explanation?

The motivating satisfaction is derived from the relative standard of living, not from the absolute standard. Frank draws on evolutionary psychology to examine the natural history of rivalry for important resources. People instinctively believe that getting more moves them ahead, so satisfaction depends on interpersonal comparisons of relative consumption. Humans are evidently traders. The competition motive that Adam Smith saw in the "invisible hand" of the market and that Charles Darwin saw in the "survival of the fittest" drives the desire to accumulate, even though this has little positive impact on life satisfaction. In a stagnant economy, someone loses when someone gains, whereas in a growth economy, all can win by having more: Growth equals progress. A remedy might be to rearrange incentives to make concerns for relative position far less costly in terms of wasteful spending patterns. Yet the evolutionary purpose of motivation is not to make people happy but rather to ensure success in competition.

Furthermore, there is widespread conflict between individual and group interest. There is an incentive gap. According to Frank, this is the most important explanation for the imbalance in current consumption patterns. In natural selection, individual interests often prevail, even when what is efficient for one is wasteful for all. The individual motivation for self-gain produces collective costs. The individual pursuit of self-interest does not produce the greatest collective good when each person's well-being depends on others' actions. The spending decisions of some people affect the frames of reference with which others make important choices, and many goods become attractive to a person when others also have them. The consumption imbalance that results is that too much time is spent earning money to buy material goods, and too little time is spent with relatives and friends. This consumption imbalance results from consumption activities that are more attractive to individuals than to society. The imbalance is the result of faulty choices of individuals, and the solution to this problem lies in unilateral action. These decision errors bias choices toward conspicuous consumption. Most conspicuous consumption products and activities are commercially offered and are heavily and persuasively promoted with biased, incomplete information. Inconspicuous consumption is not visible for comparison, because, in general, such items are not offered for sale in the marketplace, so their benefits are not promoted.

Adaptation is a further contributor to the problem. People adapt to their experiences, so conspicuous consumption items are typically initially attractive, but they diminish in attractiveness rapidly over time. There is an initial thrill of novelty, but the capacity to stimulate decays. Inconspicuous consumption items exhibit the reverse characteristic. Therefore, people tend to spend too much on the first and too little on the latter, even though in the long run, the latter would contribute more to subjective well-being. Self-control is also a widespread source of problems—or rather, a lack of it. Yet Frank shows that postponement of consumption can produce more favorable consumption opportunities.

With so many incentives for excessive conspicuous consumption, Frank is concerned that people might adopt a progressive consumption tax to alter the consumption mix. This would tax spending, rather than income, with savings exempted. He recommends that people redeploy the money they do not waste in escalating luxury spending into public service jobs to improve quality of life. He also recognizes that all opportunities are greater in a wealthy society than in a poor society, and he argues that progress in all spheres of life, including the environment, requires stimulation of the economy, provided people spend their money wisely.

Trading Money and the Pursuit of Wealth for Precious Time

Following the hugely influential public service television documentary, De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor (2002), discuss a widespread dysfunctional relationship that the people in the United States have with money and the pursuit of wealth. Although the evidence is found in the United States, it can be found widely elsewhere in any "developed" society that overemphasizes economic profit and growth. This "affluenza" is making culture sick by producing a loss of economic and emotional balance. The authors reassure that it can be cured if people just recognize and take the symptoms (an embarrassment of costly riches) seriously, identify responsibility for the causes, and apply remedies of moderation in treatment of the illness. If people reduce and redirect their consumption, the authors believe that quality of life in a sustainable society can be enhanced. This will require people to recalculate their taken-for-granted desire to trade time for money.

Assimilation into society at an early age and our daily life experiences train people in the dysfunctional pursuit of money and wealth. It is argued that people engage in an obsessive quest for material gain and are addicted to material consumption. More than ever before, people live their lives by buying for instant gratification and face daily incentives to spend. This rampant consumerism has reached the level of overconsumption behavior that is deliberately encouraged by those who benefit from such habits. The economic system is programmed for dissatisfaction and designed to make money from commercial consumption messages. Buying has become a socially sanctioned addiction, borne out in shopping as therapy, even though societal discontent rises through the promotion of dissatisfaction by those whose goal is to sell something (provocatively termed "pushers"). The cost is depression and the erosion of family, community, and habitat. The effects of the dogged pursuit of more "stuff" are damaging mentally, physically, and socially, and they destroy the means of survival as a species. In consuming, people discard things and people, always in search of something better, even though happiness does not come from material possessions.

De Graaf and colleagues tackle the social problem of the damage done to people's health, their families, their communities, and their environment by the obsessive quest for material gain. The authors show that problems such as loneliness, rising debt, longer working hours, environmental pollution, family conflict, inadequate financial reserves, and rampant commercialism are caused by the epidemic of affluence seeking. Swelling expectations for wealth are played out in the conspicuous consumption of status symbols. The very definition of "wealth" draws on the economic rhetoric of "goods." Progress is defined in terms of what is consumed, so people increasingly choose things over other people. "Despite tangible indications of indigestion, we keep consuming" (p. 36). Even too much is never enough, and people fall victim to their self-induced possession overload. The corrosive effect of consumerism is to privatize much of life. Unlike citizens, consumers have no duties, responsibilities, or obligations to other consumers. The time urgency of "busyness" comes from efforts to compete in the consumption arena, bathed in exhortations to consume. The good life has become the "goods life," the basis of which is greed, status, and image.

There is hope if people seek lifestyles of the content and healthy rather than of the rich and famous. This will require that people redefine wealth in terms of sufficiency and responsibility. Commercial colonization has led to acquiring material affluence at a nonmaterial price. Hypercommercialization encourages people to meet their nonmaterial needs through material means, even as natural capital is destroyed. People must come to believe that the real need for high fulfilment with low environmental impact is not the false needs created by advertisers. Again, quality supersedes mere quantity.

The View from the Hill

The issue identified in these books is not how to be a successful marketer or who should control big business. It is whether the level and way of resource consumption is self-defeating; in the pursuit of more, people actually get less. It is whether, in the acquisition of some things, people deny themselves other things without realizing that the success formula is wrong (i.e., more = better). People need to make a conscious choice: Does more consumption bring a better life, or does it make them miserable? The answer depends on who consumes, what they consume, how they consume, and the starting point. In an era when consumption is the practical ideology of capitalism, these authors examine the effects of the market system on personality, culture, and the ecosystem of which people are a part.

The commercial logic is simple: An open market operates in free competition that produces consumer value-for-money at a profit. Might persuasion and seduction of less-than-willing consumers to buy things also be recognized? Consumer sovereignty is a means to an end, and the marketing concept is a strategic means to corporate growth and profit. Yet the marketing system is not separate from or delivering benefits to society. It is an integral, constitutive social institution of society, yet it fosters the decline of civic engagement.

To what extent is marketing not responsible for overconsumption? Does marketing serve society by serving the individual? In serving society, are the interests of the individual necessarily served? Why does society permit, encourage, and facilitate the marketing system? From society's point of view, the role of marketing is to encourage morally defensible exchanges, that is, to increase the likelihood and frequency of free and fully informed market transactions; it claims to function as an ally to consumer buying and choice making. How are the costs justified? Is it good enough to claim that marketers give people what they want? Recently, even the foundational principle of the free market, consumer choice, has come under scrutiny. More choice is assumed to lead to greater satisfaction, yet far too much choice produces debilitating stress that erodes psychological emotional well-being and leads to clinical depression (Schwartz 2004). Social comparison also brings unhappiness for people who believe that they have failed by not choosing the best option. Perhaps marketers would better serve the interests of cost accountants and consumers if they eliminated choice to reduce stress, anxiety, busyness, and waste.

In 1969, William Lazer pointed out that in a growth-directed economy with an abundance of available resources, marketing is more than a managerial technology; its responsibility extends beyond the economic realm of profit. He viewed marketing as an institution of social control that is instrumental in reorienting culture from producer, work, and product to consumer, product, and value in consumption. Is this good for us as a species? Materialism is easy to practice in an abundant world. Marketing expands and stabilizes consumption in pursuit of economic goals, such as full employment, growth, stability, and so on. Therefore, marketing is a social instrument through which a standard of living is transmitted to society. Lazer further argued that marketers have a duty to stimulate consumption beyond consumers' natural inclination and the gratification of needs. He claimed that marketing is brought into existence by abundance. So what about social responsibility in the face of the profit motive, social goals in the face of corporate marketing objectives, and public welfare in the face of marketing actions? At about the same time, another marketing professor, R.J. Lavidge (1970) believed that marketing could contribute to the solution of social and economic problems, but he also worried about the creation or exacerbation of social problems through the stimulation of selfish desires. He urged marketers to ask not only "Can it be sold?" but also "Should it be sold?" and "Is it worth its cost to society?" He urged marketers to adopt a customer concept and to pay attention to the preservation and improvement of the habitat.

The particular criticisms set out in these books say little about marketing practice beyond persuasive advertising. There is little said about how these practices bring about the externalities that are highlighted in the analyses or about the growing sense of corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship. The focus is on consumer culture, commercialization, and the wider economic system. The consumer movement is not antagonistic toward the marketing system (at least in principle), but it aims to ensure that the system serves both sellers and buyers as consumers and as citizens. Yet who is responsible for improving the public interest in the total consumption system or for acting as stewards of society's resources? "Good" marketing is more than profitably efficient. It must account for benefits and costs. Producers need consumers who buy what they make. To what extent do consumers need marketing, and in what form? What is the price paid for this society-wide function? The economic model of the market is premised on scarcity, but there is an apparent abundance (though this is finite).

There is another set of books that portray a growing distrust of corporate capitalism played out in corporate marketing. What would society be like without large-scale marketing? These books are a critique of the consumption ethic, and it is for the marketing field to appreciate the consequences of thinking and acting in operating corporate capitalism through a profit-oriented, competitive market system. Is there something to fear? Is there a growing backlash? The discussion here is not antimarketing. The principles of the (ideal) market system are sound. It is multinational corporations' ways of bringing products and markets to consumers that is of concern. They invade work, civil liberties, and civic space. In a sense, through branding, corporations have (literally) shifted products from their inventories to the pockets of consumers. People now construct their social identity through consumption patterns rather than through work roles. What if marketing were responsibly and consciously practiced as beneficent citizenship?

Can environmental and social problems really be solved through market incentives? It is necessary to precede this question with another fundamental choice. What kind of life do people want? Do people want to be responsible citizens of sustaining, livable, and humane communities? How long can people survive and prosper as a species if they treat the world as a consumable resource rather than as a nourishing habitat?

Sustainable consumption would require sustainable marketing principles, so the concepts of well-being and the good life would need to be redefined on the basis of social development through value creation and protection. When enough is enough, and people do not "need more," each generation can strive to meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects for future generations to meet their own (as yet undefined) needs. Marketers can contribute by identifying through values and ideals rather than through material things.

In an era in which the triumph of consumerism in the popular will is celebrated by scrutinizing corporate “success factors,” such as market share, brand awareness, product popularity, growth, return on investment, profit, and so on, when will enough be enough? In the economics of happiness, welfare is still measured in terms of household consumption (captured in terms of money income). Where does the future lie?

The idea of a satiable human need will be workable in public discourse only if the ruling ideal of the unending proliferation of human wants is relinquished and replaced by a conception of sufficiency in which it is the quality of social life, rather than the quantity of goods and services, that is the central object of public policy. (Gray 1994, p. 45)

There is a need for education among the educators who set the agenda for marketing practitioners. What would “marketing for sufficiency” or “sustainable marketing” be like?

Ironically, I acquired a copy of each of the books I reviewed second hand. Finding that these books are readily available through this channel, I was able to “recycle.” Thus, the purchase cost was lower, and no further copies needed to be printed, but the consumption of polluting aviation fuel and the paper and sticky tape of international mailing increased through my actions. Let us hope that it was worth it.

This analysis suggests that marketers need to understand the individual motivation and behavior of citizens as consumers in the societal system of habitat, ecology, and evolution. Sustainable marketing is not about prolonging the efficient marketing system and the economic prosperity of individual participants. Much more profoundly, sustainability is the necessary condition for survival and well-being, and it requires (nondestructive) value creation.

Civilization is a limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessaries.
—Mark Twain

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Endnote: Liberty is defined as whatever people want the most must be best for them;

consumption is sacred.

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