

## Columnists

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## Rein in consumption, cut stress

Today we'll dive into our pile of stuff and examine the state of consumption in the 21st century.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Consumption has gotten a bad name. When we hear America described as a "consumer society," it's rarely a compliment. Examples of overconsumption abound.

But consumption isn't inherently negative. Buying and using things keeps us alive and can improve our quality of life. The trick is to consume without creating excess waste or jeopardizing future resources.

Today we'll dive into our pile of stuff and examine the state of consumption in the 21st century.

**Q:** Should we really even be defined as "consumers"?

**A:** We never totally consume anything, since food and possessions pass through our bodies and our lives, eventually getting turned into waste or re-purposed. But all of us buy and use stuff, so consumer is as good a word as any to describe that part of our existence.

**Q:** Hasn't America been consumption-oriented ever since TV and advertising took off in the 1950s? Why should we care about consumption as an issue now?

**A:** As concerns about global warming and resource depletion increase, the stakes rise. Recent research indicates that future consumption levels in the U.S. and worldwide will have enormous environmental ramifications.

**Q:** Has the nature of consumption itself changed?

**A:** Yes. Here are a few trends:

- Today we face a mind-boggling array of product choices. Take air fresheners, for example. Most air fresheners contain mystery chemicals and may compromise indoor air quality. Nevertheless, air fresheners now come in a plethora of versions including battery-operated, plug-in and even motion-detecting, all in multiple fragrances.

- Practically any product can be purchased instantly through the Internet.
- Advertising has invaded nearly every sphere of life. Mainstream entertainment, from TV talent competitions to pro football, features "product placements" incorporating advertising into the main event. Marketing also permeates social media such as Facebook, Twitter and the new sensation Pinterest, and has become an increasing presence on our "smartphones."
- Product innovation frequently favors convenience over environmental concerns, as illustrated by popular new coffee makers using single-serving, unrecyclable coffee pods.

**Q:** What roles do style and fashion trends play?

**A:** These fickle trends encourage consumers to change out furniture, clothing and other products when they are still usable. This has gone on for years but has intensified recently, heavily influenced by ubiquitous advertising. When we replace cellphones after just a few months, for instance, it's often for style and status reasons, not just for the perceived new features.

Style-centric consumption creates a wasteful cycle of increased resource use. When consumers lose interest in keeping clothing, furniture and other possessions for a long time, manufacturers respond by making products less durable.

**Q:** How do we change the dynamic of unsustainable consumption?

**A:** A growing number of alternatives to our over-consumptive culture have emerged. Here's what you can do:

- Embrace "collaborative consumption." This refers to borrowing, sharing or trading instead of buying and includes car-sharing programs, clothing swaps and neighborhood "tool libraries."
- Make a conscious effort to buy more durable and repairable products and keep them longer. Paying more up front often saves you money in the long run.
- Support sustainable products and companies, but be skeptical of unsubstantiated marketing claims.
- Buy used instead of new. Many retailers in the Seattle area that sell used clothing, furniture, building materials and other reclaimed products have been thriving lately, expanding and creating new jobs.

**Q:** Speaking of jobs, don't efforts to reduce excess consumption hurt the economy overall?

**A:** Not necessarily. Money we save by shopping at thrift stores or getting rid of one of our cars, for example, will usually be spent somewhere else, hopefully on sustainable purchases. Eco-conscious consumption generates abundant jobs, from energy auditing to recycling processing to manufacturing with green materials.

Reining in consumption can also make our lives less stressful and more enjoyable. We all benefit when we put stuff in its proper place.

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