

Columnists

Originally published Friday, November 2, 2012 at 5:30 PM

By paying more in the beginning, you sometimes end up paying less

Paying as little as possible for a consumer product often backfires, and we end up paying more money in the long run when a cheap product quickly falls apart. Even worse, cheap products typically have hidden social and environmental costs.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times



"Why pay more?" This simple question, used as a come-on in countless ads, reinforces our consumer culture's obsession with paying the lowest price possible.

But the real price we pay for a product involves more than just money.

Q: What's so wrong about wanting to pay as little as possible for a product?

A: Nothing, although it often backfires and we end up paying more money in the long run when a cheap product quickly falls apart. Even worse, cheap products typically have hidden social and environmental costs.

Products may be produced with child or slave labor, or under unsafe conditions. Mining, farming and manufacturing can deplete natural resources, degrade soils and pollute air and water. Toxics in products and packaging may endanger workers producing them and consumers using the products.

Q: That's a sobering list. Do I need to feel guilty every time I buy something?

A: You shouldn't feel bad about trying to save money. But we can all educate ourselves better about the environmental and social costs of products.

Q: Where do we begin?

A: Let's start with the clothes on your back. It's now common for large retailers to sell shirts and other articles of clothing for under \$8. Cotton farmers and clothing factories in places such as Uzbekistan and Bangladesh face enormous pressure from retailers and distributors to produce crops and clothing cheaper than their competitors, resulting in social and environmental abuses.

Just 3 percent of clothing bought in the U.S. is made in the U.S., compared with about 50 percent in 1990, according to journalist Elizabeth Cline, author of the new book "Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion."

This has made it increasingly difficult to track environmental impacts and working conditions at far-flung farms and clothing factories. Many other industries have the same issues.

Q: As a consumer, what are my alternatives for buying clothes?

A: On the website for her book, Cline provides a shopping directory (overdressedthebook.com/where-to-shop) listing nearly 200 companies that produce clothes or accessories in the U.S. or have committed to ethical standards in overseas production. This directory lists several companies that manufacture clothing in Seattle, including Beyond Clothing, C.C. Filson, Crescent Down Works and Ebbets Field Flannels. Shopping at thrift stores is also a great low-impact way to go.

Q: My pet peeve is inexpensive small appliances that break quickly. What's the solution?

A: Many small appliances such as coffee makers and microwave ovens are no longer easily repairable and last only a few years, resulting in hidden environmental costs including waste disposal and resource consumption.

Buy better-made products. To find higher-quality small appliances and other products, consult Consumer Reports magazine, available at most libraries. If you have a Seattle Public Library card, you can read recent Consumer Reports reviews online at no charge at seati.ms/WPIcrf.

Q: With the holiday-shopping season approaching, what about cheap products that pose particular risks to children?

A: Parents should be wary of inexpensive costume-jewelry items, which are common Christmas stocking stuffers. Even though state and federal regulations limit the use of certain hazardous substances in children's products, costume jewelry containing toxic heavy metals is still widely available. Avoid the type of no-name, unbranded costume jewelry found in "dollar stores."

Q: What else can be done about the hidden costs of cheap products?

A: Consumers need help recognizing these social and environmental costs, which is where "product stewardship" comes in. This national movement aims to have manufacturers, distributors and retailers take full responsibility for their products, from production to disposal.

This may involve companies paying recycling costs, for example, even if that means they must increase the price of their products.

Consumers should let companies and governments know that they expect product stewardship, which tends to shine a light on hidden costs.

"Why pay more?" The best answer might be another old advertising slogan: "You get what you pay for."

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