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THE customer is king, goes the saying. Why not exploit that adage to the fullest by influencing social and environmental concerns with your purchasing power? By being aware of the implications of your choices, you can reduce the adverse impact of your purchases.

Being a green consumer does not mean abstaining from, or opposing, all forms of consumption. It is about consuming better.

Buying in the spirit of sustainable development also means looking beyond mere value for money to thinking about the impact of the purchase. Did those shrimps come from a farm dug from a mangrove forest? Is that dress made from pesticide-infused cotton? Did this furniture contribute to the destruction of rainforests? Was this coffee traded fairly?

All purchases take a toll on the environment, directly or indirectly. So when you exercise your power by choosing where and what to buy, you help change the world for the better. To buy sustainably, consider these points:

- ◆ **Usefulness** ◆ Avoid buying goods or services you do not really need. This will help prevent over-consumption, which ultimately will deplete natural resources.
- ◆ **Know the product** ◆ Check labels. Find out about its price, quality, brand, properties, country of origin, raw materials, the conditions under which it was manufactured, and its effects on human health and the environment. For instance, you might not want to buy gold if you knew how destructive gold mining has been in Africa and South America.
- ◆ **Prevention** ◆ Choose goods and services that cause the least harm to the environment and your health. For example, opt for a water-based paint rather than one containing solvents. And buy recycled gold jewellery ◆ fashioned from gold dust or old jewellery ◆ instead of new pieces.
- ◆ **Consider alternatives** ◆ Is there a substitute that is better and less harmful to the environment or human health?
- ◆ **Efficiency** ◆ Consider the means used to produce an item or service and to deliver it to consumers, and go for the one that is most respectful of the environment.
- ◆ **Quality** ◆ Choose products with a long useful life. In the long term, their manufacture would have used up fewer natural resources and less energy, resulting in less waste. A higher priced item may be justified if it is better made, more durable and consumes less energy.

Hot tips

To be a sustainable consumer, your decisions have to be based on various considerations. Take it step by step and stay realistic. Start by asking the right questions with regard to a few products which you buy frequently, then go on to using this approach in other areas.

For everyday purchases (food, personal hygiene products, laundry and cleaning products), you should consider:

- >> The amount of packaging.
- >> Effects on the users' health.
- >> Environmental impact of the product.
- >> Origin of the product.
- >> How the product was transported to the sales outlet.
- >> Their repercussion on employment.

For long-term items (furniture, household appliances, electronic goods, lighting), packaging is of relatively lesser significance but consider:

- >> The item's useful life.
- >> Its durability.
- >> The availability of a service centre and spare parts.
- >> Consumption of energy and water.
- >> Its recycled content and recyclable parts.

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