

Posted by Brad Tuttle Tuesday, August 31, 2010 at 8:33 am

Could it be that consumers aren't quite as gullible as marketers, manufacturers, and advertisers have long assumed? Could it be that today's consumers are smarter and more informed than they have ever been when it comes to deciding whether to buy or pass on a product? Could it be that the age of mindless accumulation is gone for good, replaced by a scene in which consumers consider their purchases carefully and place more value in, well, actual value? A new book answers all of these questions with a resounding YES—and perhaps most surprising of all, the book was written not by an anti-consumerism crusader but by a marketing executive.

Andrew Benett, Global CEO of Arnold Worldwide and chief strategy officer of Havas Worldwide, is the co-author of *Consumed: Rethinking Business in the Era of Mindful Spending*.

Check out this snippet of text from the preface, and you'll quickly realize the book talks about consumerism—and our most recent era of hyperconsumerism—with rare honesty and bite:

Imagine what archeologists from an alien world might think were they to excavate the closets and garages of average households on shopping-mad Planet Earth—not to mention the billions (yes, billions) of square feet of rental storage space ...

A particularly clever archeologist might hit upon the truth: For decades, a relentless stream of container ships bursting with low-cost goods from cheap-labor countries engorged the shelves of fast-expanding shopping malls and online stores. During these heady years, mindful shopping gave way to mindless accumulation, with the full approbation of pointy-headed economists. Manufacturers and advertisers were there, too, gleefully rubbing their hands—pressing and prodding, messaging and motivating the masses to stay in the dance, to keep picking up the tempo and never stop to catch a breath or take in the larger scene. For millions of us on the whirling dance floor, shopping became a way to pick ourselves up after a tough day at work and a source of entertainment on weekends. Mindless accumulation proved as satisfying as any drug.

Throughout the book, it's refreshingly clear that we're not dealing with the marketing mentality that assumes consumers are naïve and constantly prods them to BUY, BUY, BUY.

Below, Bennett answers my questions and discusses today's smarter more enlightened and more aware consumers, why certain marketing techniques succeed or fail horribly in the modern era, and brands ranging from Apple to Hummer, Nike to Nintendo.

A lot of what's in the book seems pretty anti-consumerism, or at least anti-hyperconsumerism. I'm talking about phrases that pop up regularly like "mindless accumulation." Do colleagues and acquaintances in the marketing world ever come up to you and say something to the effect of "Dude, you're totally blowing it for us. Don't tell people this kind of stuff. It makes our jobs much more difficult to convince consumers to buy things"?

AB: As marketers, our job is to help our clients prepare for these types of cultural shifts. We want to be one step ahead of the curve and understand the trends that are impacting consumer behavior.

Consumerism will always be alive in America. It's not going away. During the last couple decades, though, the sheer amount of stuff we consumed was unprecedented. As a society, "more is more" and "bigger is better" ruled our culture as people sought bigger houses, bigger cars, bigger meals and acquired bigger debts. Now, we're reassessing and realizing that we don't want to supersize everything anymore. We want to "rightsize" and find a balance.

In what ways do you think shoppers are smarter, more aware, and potentially harder to reach today, from the marketing perspective?

AB: Consumers have become desensitized to mass-media marketing. We've learned to tune out messages we want to ignore. For instance, when a commercial comes on television, we surf the web on our laptops or fast-forward through DVR. In order to grab and hold our attention, marketers have to create something that's truly engaging.

Plus, the Internet has made it so easy for consumers to find information on brands, products and services with a few strokes on a keyboard. We're living in an age when we can get recommendations from family, friends and other consumers in an instant. Social media, smartphones, apps ... all of these advancements in technology are empowering consumers to get what we want from a variety of sources beyond advertising.

The challenge for marketers is to create communications and experiences that break through all the media competing for our time and grab our attention with something entertaining or useful. In the end, the challenge is worth it, because we're giving consumers something they want, so it resonates on a deeper level.

You say that we are now at a turning point in consumer spending. But how do you know that this new era of "mindful spending" is here to stay? Isn't it possible that once (if?) the economy picks up again consumers will fall back to their free-spending ways?

AB: There are some people who think that consumers will go back to their hyperconsumerist ways once the economy rebounds, but we would disagree. First of all, the circumstances that made hyperconsumption possible have changed fundamentally since the recession, including access to easy credit and low energy costs.

Additionally, we had been seeing signs of discontent with our hyperconsumerist culture even before the recession, such as the simplicity movement, the mainstreaming of eco-consciousness, the Slow Food movement, and the rise of "conscious nourishment" (e.g., natural foods, organics, functional foods).

The recession accelerated these trends by giving people a chance to reflect. Many of us realized that rampant spending didn't bring the happiness we thought it would. It's not that the recession forced consumers into a new pattern of living; it simply provided an opportunity to stop, reflect and, ultimately, decide to no longer keep up with the Joneses.

If indeed we are in a new era for consumers, are there once-successful products and brands out there that are bound to fail now? I'm thinking of the Hummer, or a brand like Blockbuster. How would you try to market products that today's savvy consumers are unlikely to embrace?

AB: Both Hummer and Blockbuster are perfect examples of brands that failed to recognize and act quickly on shifts happening in the consumer space. When you think of Hummer, you think "gas guzzler." When you think of Blockbuster, you think of an extra errand in your busy day and late-return fees. These once popular companies didn't innovate their products and services to be relevant for tomorrow's consumers.

On the other side of the spectrum, a brand like Nike embraced and invested in digital technologies early and gained a significant head start on its competitors. Another brand is Nintendo. It could have easily gone the way of Atari, but instead, it redefined the gaming category. The Nintendo Wii expanded the gaming audience beyond teenage boys to include everyone, even grandparents. That's a pretty remarkable feat when you think about it. Then, there are numerous everyday brands that are reinventing how consumers perceive them. Take Clorox, for instance: it's redefining a brand synonymous with bleach by creating a line of natural cleaning products called Green Works.

The most important thing is that brands understand their customers and anticipate what they'll want next on both a functional and emotional level - even before the customers know they want it.

In many surveys, consumers say that they are more likely to want quality (rather than cheap instant gratification), authenticity (rather than mass-market schlock), and environmentally friendly goods (rather than stuff that'll sit in landfills forever). Is there proof that consumers actually put their money where their mouths are, or is it possible that many people say these things and do something else?

AB: Certainly, it's an evolution. Are we completely there yet? No. Consumers may not put their money where their mouths are in every purchase decision, but they are making more mindful choices more frequently. In surveys, consumers sometimes respond to an idealized, aspirational version that they have of themselves. What those answers say to a marketer like me is that there's a genuine desire for more quality, meaning and awareness in what, why and from whom they buy. Those desires are the catalyst for behavior shifts.

Look at the massive popularity of the book (and, subsequently, the movie) *Eat Pray Love*. The story about a woman leaving behind everything to pursue a personal quest to find meaning and purpose in her life struck a chord with millions of people and became a cultural phenomenon. It resulted in a huge product-marketing push for everything from clothes to candles, jewelry, teas, and so on. Now, I don't necessarily think that the product tie-ins are all authentic or true to the essence of the book, but it does show that there's a market for products that can align themselves with this type of messaging.

There are plenty of consumers out there -- like Jeff Yeager's *Cheapskates Next Door* -- who believe that products and brands that spend lots on marketing are, in fact, bad values. The

thinking goes: When you buy a high-profile product, you're paying partly for all that money spent on marketing and fancy packaging, and wouldn't you rather pay for just the product itself? What's your take on this theory?

AB: Your point is valid to a degree, and it's one of the main reasons why marketing is moving beyond just communicating brand messages to becoming functional. More and more, marketing is serving a specific purpose in consumers' lives. Whether it's the successful Kraft iFood assistant mobile app, which offers recipes and how-to videos that can be accessed while shopping in the grocery store, or an online platform like Starbucks' MyStarbucksIdea.com, which encourages consumers to share their ideas for making the brand better, marketing is increasingly focusing on utility, inviting consumers into the process and adding value beyond the usual products and services.

That being said, there's still an important role for traditional marketing and its ability to inform wide audiences about product and service benefits. And there's definitely an allure and appreciation for packaging when done well. For instance, there's something about unwrapping an Apple product from its cleverly designed packaging that feels intrinsically part of the Apple experience. Maybe it won't be like that forever, but it's still effective for now.

Source: [http://money.blogs.time.com/2010/08/31/qa-with-andrew-bennett-author-of-consumed-rethinking-business-in-the-era-of-mindful-spending/?artId=4747?contType=blog\\_its\\_your\\_money?chn=us](http://money.blogs.time.com/2010/08/31/qa-with-andrew-bennett-author-of-consumed-rethinking-business-in-the-era-of-mindful-spending/?artId=4747?contType=blog_its_your_money?chn=us)