Sustainable living

Strategies for breaking the cycle of work and spend

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Abstract Consumerism is skyrocketing in the USA. This paper assists land-grant university National Cooperative Research Extension Education Service (NCREES) faculty in understanding the definition of a consumer society, the dynamics of consumption patterns, the factors and values of sustainable economics, and the varying interpretations of consumer characteristics. It then identifies possible target populations, and suggests educational strategy options to be used to foster sustainable lifestyles and responsible consumer decisions. The strategies, which encompass NCREES disciplines, include a quality of life questioning system; redefining the relationship between job and social status; economics coursework; LETS education; time management and simple living workshops; acting as conduits to other programs; and most importantly, modeling sustainable behaviors. These are all important components of the sustainability formula and indicate some areas where universities could be more pro-active.

Introduction

Since the National Cooperative Research Extension Education Service (NCREES) is an American institution, a quick explanation may be useful. The USA has a longstanding cooperative extension service. As part of the land-grant university system, the extension service was established in the 1800s to educate farmers and ranchers in rural areas about the newest advances in agricultural science. Today’s Extension Service has expanded its original mission, to include bringing practical, scientific, research-based education in forestry, agriculture, energy, water resources, and family, youth and community development to residents of every county in every state in the USA.

Extension faculty present workshops and offer field training, develop curricula, conduct research, and also respond to direct inquiries from the public. This “extending” the education found on campus to county residents is accomplished by a national cadre of approximately 10,000 extension agents and specialists. Generally, agents focus their work on one or several counties; specialists have statewide responsibilities, and sometimes even extend their work into neighboring states.

In the US university system, because of the close ties to citizens of a geographical area, extension faculty are often among the first to observe societal shifts and trends, and then develop education programs to address that need. In the past two years, a growing number of extension professionals in the USA have begun developing sustainable living curricula to counter the deleterious cultural, social and environmental effects of consumerism.
This paper is intended to assist natural resource colleagues in understanding consumer economics, the implications of a consumer society, and in developing educational strategies which foster sustainable lifestyles and responsible consumer decisions.

**Food for thought**

Question: How much income per year would you say you (and your family) need to fulfill all of your dreams? (Schor, 1998, Table 1.2, p. 15).

*Median response*

- 1987 – $50,000
- 1994 – $102,000

Consumerism is skyrocketing in the USA. People are spending more, and saving less. Over 3,000 commercial messages bombard the average American in their home and in public spaces each day (*Enough!* 1999.) Daily life is becoming more and more commodified, with businesses now providing services – childcare, cleaning, running errands, paying taxes – that Americans used to do for themselves.

**Defining consumer society**

Dr Juliet Schor in *The Overspent American* defines a consumer society as;

A society in which discretionary consumption has become a mass phenomenon, not just the province of the rich or even the middle classes (Schor, 1998a, Note 24, p. 217).

Economist Paul Ekins observes:

The possession and use of an increasing number and variety of goods and services is the principal cultural aspiration and the surest perceived route to personal happiness, social status and national success (Ekins, 1991).

In this context, the USA has truly become a consumer society.

Besides becoming a mass phenomenon, our consumer society also requires continuous growth in consumption expenditures for successful economic functioning. Thus, non-satiation becomes the general norm. US social and political stability are dependent on the delivery of consumer goods. Finally, and sadly, our very cultural and moral values are becoming almost inextricably linked to our consumer economic arrangement (Schor, 1998).

**Dynamics of consumption patterns**

In the USA, both income and consumption are increasing, creating a constant “upscaling” of needed goods and services. The early adopters in a community create new standards – bigger houses, faster computers – which others aspire to emulate, creating a self-perpetuating cycle in which consumers can never catch up. Schor (1999) calls this constant ratcheting up a “collective action failure”.
Referent groups have changed. In the past, suburbanites “kept up with the Joneses”. Now the reference group for the majority of US families is not the neighbor who shares the same socio-economic stratus, but the super-star athlete earning a six-figure salary. We do not want what the Joneses have: we want what Michael Jordan has.

According to Schor (1999), this change in reference groups is the result of mass media. While “daily exposure to an economically diverse set of people in the workplace” is one reason why Americans are upgrading aspirations, TV is a far more effective medium in reaching every income group (Schor, 1998). The heavy TV watcher is more likely to feel they don’t have as many status items as other Americans (Schor, 1999).

Schor believes our economic system makes two-income families face a trade-off between time and income. Employees can negotiate for wages but not generally for hours of work. So, people have more money than time. Income-intensive consumption, whether heavily packaged convenience food or expensive leisure (which Linder and Becker call the “theory of the harried”) is generally more ecologically destructive (Schor, 1999). An environmentally-responsible lifestyle requires more time, something Americans perceive they do not have.

Factors and values

The traditional economic view of consumption is that it is based on human greed. However modern economists such as Douthwaite (1992), author of The Growth Illusion, assert that the driving consumerist force is our economic system. To flourish, it requires that income and consumption increase each year. Since sustainable societies are stable, both Schor and Douthwaite contend that our current economic system precludes sustainability (1999).

Humans need to belong. In his book How Much is Enough? Durning (1992) states that in a consumer society, the need to be valued and respected by others is expressed by consumption. Durning (1992) quotes a Wall Street banker, “Net worth equals self-worth”. Homes, cars, and jobs determine status for Americans, more than families, religion or community standing.

Americans are good at rationalizing function. In a 1996 Roper survey, most respondents indicated they did not consider themselves to be excessive consumers (Schor, 1999). Between 17 to 51 percent of the people surveyed identified the following items as necessities: answering machine, microwave, second car, home air conditioning, and basic cable service (Schor, 1998). Upgrading computer software to keep up with technology, purchasing a cell phone to better serve customers, or trading in a sedan to buy a sport utility vehicle for family safety, are all justifiable in our minds. The list of essentials continues to grow.

To understand the social underpinnings of consumption, it is critical to understand the relationship between consumption, happiness and time. Durning highlights a key point:
The main determinants of happiness in life are not related to consumption at all – prominent among them are satisfaction with family life, especially marriage, followed by satisfaction with work, leisure to develop talents, and friendships (Durning, 1992, p. 47).

In US surveys, Americans rank spending more time with family and friends and having less stress as the two most important things that would raise their life satisfaction (Schor, 1997). Our consumer society is a time-eater, thus preventing us from enjoying what we say we want the most.

**Characteristics of consumers**

Our perceptions of the characteristics of consumers have changed over the years. Schor (1999) interprets the first generation of economic theorists (exemplified by Marx, and Adorno and Horkheimer), as depicting consumers as passive recipients of mass culture goods with no role in determining what was produced. Galbraith also portrayed consumers in a similar light, adding the acquisitive and insatiable desires of the buying public, and Wachtel went so far as to say that consumers suffered from psychological deficiencies which were overcome when consumption occurred (Schor, 1999). These theories viewed consumers as non-intelligent and non-discriminating.

Schor (1999), drawing on the work of Veblen and Bourdieu, offers a more balanced view of US consumers. While acknowledging the kernels of truth within the past theories, Schor postulates that there is social and symbolic meaning in what Americans consume, and that understanding how we consume communicates our status to others. Fantasy or novelty-seeking permeates our consumptive patterns. By buying, we escape the drabness of our ordinary lives. Schor does not espouse the theory that consuming is innate or natural to humans.

**Target populations**

Two populations within the vast US middle class are logical audiences for extension education on sustainable living. The first, the “new urban middle culture,” is younger, urban and middle class, highly educated, associated with the professions and/or management, and has discretionary income (Simon-Brown, 1999).

Approximately 15 percent of the US population, this group which emerged from the 1970s and 1980s, prefers natural fibers and artesanal goods. Authenticity is also a key element in purchasing decisions. Buying a rare antique, or handmade clothing from a third world country appeals to the need for novelty. Many members of this consumer class view themselves as environmentally-responsible, often equating “going green” by “buying green”.

Thirty percent of the US population is in the second target group. The values of the lower middle class bear little similarity to the new urban culture (Simon-Brown, 1999). For this group, comfort and low cost often supersede fashion. This population seeks less expensive, mass-produced goods available through
lower-cost chain outlets. Ecological impacts are not generally considered in purchasing decisions but finding the cheapest price does. This group watches more TV, therefore is more influenced by its advertising messages.

High consumption within a society creates social injustice and class inequality. Living in a consumer society is particularly difficult for the working poor who have little discretionary income. While this population group would benefit from knowing sustainable living concepts, they may find it difficult to explore philosophical quality of life questions while living at subsistence levels.

In light of the limited time resources available to extension professionals, there appears little need to work with either the affluent top 20 percent of US society, or with the already “green” consumer.

**Strategies**

Durning (1992) states that “if the life-supporting ecosystems of the planet are to survive for future generations,” at least three things must happen. First, our society will have to drastically reduce resource use by switching to “high quality, low-input durable goods” and by increasing non-material avenues for fulfillment, such as leisure and human relationships. Second, Americans will have to live “lower on the economic ladder” albeit continuing to use our less-consumptive technologies. Third and most important, “sustaining the environment that sustains humanity will require that we change our values.”

Extension professionals can employ several research-based educational strategies to encourage middle class adults to adopt more sustainable lifestyles. Whatever methods are chosen, to effect long-lasting positive change, two practices will be necessary to any sustainable living discourse: respect for the values of the people participating in our programs; and mechanisms to assist them in identifying their own quality of life indicators.

Since positive change will not occur unless participants address their quality of life issues, a process developed by Harold Glasser may be useful for extension professionals. A student of Arne Naess and the Deep Ecology movement, Glasser has designed a questioning system to assist people in determining their foundational values (ultimate norms) and actions to be taken (concrete consequences) by applying “logical priorities” in which “fundamental value priorities form ultimate premises” (Naess and Mysterud, 1985).

Consumers often identify their social status by their possessions. Family development agents and specialists may be interested in offering workshops which help consumers redefine their relationship to jobs and material goods. Successful “downshifters” – people who consciously earn and spend less money – are able to sever the link between who they are and the amount of money they earn. Highlighting in education materials the underlying values of the US consumer society may be useful to engage citizens in sustainable living dialogue.

Since middle class adults are supported by economic and social systems, new programs could provide opportunities to analyze the strong economic underpinnings of our culture. Douthwaite (1999) believes that the ability of a
nuclear family to create lasting change is limited, while local communities can be quite effective in developing economic systems based on sustainability models.

Educational programming to inform citizens about local community initiatives could be considered. LETS (Local Economic Trading Systems) enjoy considerable success within mainstream communities in the UK. So do local banking systems, local energy development, and local food production and distribution. Asking “How do we build sustainable communities to build a sustainable world?” can develop a synergy of ideas and solutions. Sometimes people will attend workshops to help their community and find that they have actually helped themselves.

The recent proliferation of time management workshops indicates the deep seated anxiety we have about the US pace of life. Rather than teach more efficient ways to compartmentalize time, it would be far more beneficial for Extension faculty to offer programming which addresses the roots of our time crunch.

Building on the recently-released Simple Living Extension publications, workshops on the topic of advertising can be offered (adapted from Quick and Flashman, 1997). Advertising and marketing can be decoded through educational materials which enable consumers to distinguish between “wants” and “needs.”

Modeling sustainable behaviors is a powerful tool in effecting change. Teaming up with on-campus faculty, administrators and students to build experimental and experiential learning environments which exemplify sustainability principles is a challenging and worthy goal. A significant amount of literature already exists, so it would be a matter of adaptation rather than creation. Collett and Karakashian recommend “greening the college curriculum” in their book with same name (1996). “Sustainable development on campus: tools for decision makers”, “Campus ecology program” and “Blueprint for a green campus” are available on the Web.

Extension professionals can also act as conduits to other programs which espouse sustainable living principles. Churches, voluntary simplicity circles, frugality groups, EcoTeams, Green Savers, as well as a myriad Web sites, offer a broad range of choices.

Conclusion
In 1997, Juliet Schor addressed colleagues at Tilburg University in The Netherlands:

Ultimately, the most serious problem with an economy of work and spend is not, to quote one famous American philosopher, that “superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only.” Nor is it that consumption cannot ensure our happiness. Rather, the problem is the suspicion that “work and spend” undermines precisely those things which do bring happiness; robbing us of our time, our children’s childhoods, our social engagements and our friendships. In place of these true human satisfactions, it offers money and consumer goods. But is it a good bargain? (Schor, 1997, p. 38).
NCREES professionals are witnessing the cultural, economic and environmental effects of US consumption. With their collegial linkages and their practical, research-based education strategies, extension professionals are well-positioned to help 100 million middle-class Americans make better consumer decisions and represent strategic partners on whose support universities may call on in making sustainability a reality.

References


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