

THE SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS SHOPPER

By Stephanie Jackson

It was the mayonnaise that did it, that sent me into a rapidly spiralling decline towards insanity - mayonnaise - low fat, no fat, natural, salt free, pure, tangy, squeezable, local, or imported.

Political correctness and environmental and social awareness have made shopping a confusing chore as various forms of subtle propaganda attempt to shape our buying habits.

Youthful faces with gleaming saccharine smiles silently scream a breakfast message of eternal youth in a vain attempt to convince me that devouring 'their' product - the one with no sugar, low fat, minerals, vitamins, and bran - will miraculously transform me into a super athlete, or some slim, energetic, and glamorous creature. I scowl back at their supercilious cardboard smiles, resentful at the audacious assumption that their physique is unquestionably superior to my short, plump one. And ignoring unspoken hints of doom, I grab the more delectable varieties that will rot my teeth, raise my blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and send me to an early grave.

Sugar laden cordials stand to attention, and salt laden crisps in a hundred varieties tumble from shelves - fat, thin, wrinkled - like the hordes of customers who impatiently jostle to buy them.

I scurry past pressure pack cans with ozone depleting propellants - flysprays, hairsprays, deodorants, and air fresheners, all destined to make the domestic environment smell more 'appealing' while obliterating the sweet, inconspicuous aroma of uncontaminated fresh air; to instil a fragrance of floral gardens in loos; and to illogically replace homely kitchen aromas of boiled cabbage and corned beef with an odour vaguely reminiscent of pine or eucalypt forests.

TV housewives give thanks to the gods of Sudso for blessings received, proclaiming, with amazement, the performance of miracles when oil soaked shirts appear whiter than even white itself. But is Sudso green, biodegradable, environmentally friendly, and phosphate free?

Even buying the most elementary of human needs - toilet paper - creates a dilemma as that baffling question is raised - should I buy bleached, non-bleached, recycled, thicker, floral, or perfumed paper? A few torn remnants of The Daily Blurb once proved adequate for the backside wiping task, with the added bonus of a good read, although murmurs of frustration could be heard when the concluding paragraph of some riveting yarn had been flushed away by the last person to take their seat on the throne.

"Buy products made from renewable resources", hordes of greenies shout as they stand before rattling bulldozers and face the angry gaze of burly men wielding growling chainsaws. So it's old-fashioned wooden clothes pegs for me, not those gaudy plastic ones. But are they produced from plantation timber grown with love and compassion for the environment - or for a slow buck - or were they once gnarled branches from an old growth forest where greenies had stood defiantly yet lost the battle? But I needn't worry they're made in China, not from fair England's trees, so it's not my problem.

“Buy British made” advertising campaigns shout from Asian TV screens, but even the minute scraps of wood used to manufacture tooth picks and matches come from somewhere else. Don’t buy Chinese food, we’re told, for it might be contaminated with antifreeze or other potentially harmful ingredients. Boycott goods from nations using sweat shop labour, and from lands ruled by dictators who are seen as the enemies of a caring society. But what do I do if it’s from Mugabe’s Zimbabwe where any company that has survived that ravaged nation’s turmoil needs every penny it can get its hand on?

Was that face cream, with its illusory promise to convert the corrugated surface of my skin to youthful, dewy freshness, cruelly tested on innocent fluffy animals; dripped monotonously into the streaming eyes of some balding baboon; or approved by animal welfare activists? And were those eggs laid in days of tormented boredom by cruelly confined chickens, with beaks trimmed, that are little more than squawking, animated egg factories.

Silver fish with a sparkle in their stilled grey eyes lie motionless among the ice, victims of long line fishermen who deplete our oceans perhaps; harvested from managed resources; or trapped in nets with sacrificial dolphins, turtles, or dugongs merely to provide a traditional accompaniment to chips?

Rows of gleaming red apples, golden pears, and succulent plums line jumbled racks where wildly swinging signs, dangling from above, announce unquestionably, “Fresh fruit is good for your health.” But is it fresh - or polished, waxed, dipped, sprayed, irradiated, or genetically modified? Is an apple still an apple, or is it a deceptive fruit infused with animal genes to grow at the rate of some brutish pig? And that enticing, now hairless, peach might seem as smooth as the inner shell of some mollusc with whose genes it may have been unsuspectingly implanted.

Uncontrollable trolleys career into heels. A dislodged carton of custard spews its contents across the floor. A child screams. Its mother, fearing persecution with the assumption that any smack of reprimand might be deemed assault, blocks her ears in a way I’m unable to imitate. “Don’t do that Dylan, there’s a good boy”. But the screams continue as imaginary hands, my hands, reach out to throttle mother’s little darling.

A loud speaker shouts too, a garbled, rehearsed machine-gun dialogue. “Don’t forget, shoppers, this week’s special bargain, at an unbelievably low, low price.” I silently agree - it is unbelievable - and elbow my way impatiently past the social set among their huddle of empty trolleys, exchanging the latest gossip.

In my haste to escape, I rush past crowded shelves, their crammed contents offering prizes, refunds, bonuses, and enticements of receiving more than a mere jar of jam or coffee. Buy one, get one free; win something irresistibly glamorous; a holiday in Timbuctoo; some obscure electronic gadget; or grab the chance to become an instant millionaire. Then, with relief, I reach the check-out and hand over a few coins for the jar of mayonnaise - the natural, light, low salt, low fat one. With practiced formality the young girl smiles. “Have a good day, and thank you for shopping at”

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