

Clearly highly consumptive

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



The society we live in today is clearly highly consumptive. By this I mean we consume mass produced commodities in abundance. We drive cars, use microwaves, listen to CDs, wear GAP khakis, eat packaged foods, live in pre-fab houses, watch Sony TVs, burn fossil fuels, and brush our teeth with Colgate (tartar control). We buy to fulfil our needs: basic and not-so basic. We are a consumer society; we buy, use, and discard to survive. [Although survival is rarely the impetus behind consumer purchases.]

We are immersed in a consumer culture which eschews a dependency and faith in the commodity market like no other; it's an entire way of life -- we even define ourselves in terms of consumption. ("How many have you got?") Indeed, consumption has become a cultural ideal. Stuart Ewen summed it up beautifully when he noted that, "the commodity system enjoys a kind of passively accepted legitimacy as the universal arena within which most human needs are to be met..." (p. 187 *Captains of Consciousness*). The culture of consumption is now the prevalent cultural form.

It wasn't always like this. Before the days of mass production and ubiquitous industry, most people sustained themselves through farming, a system of barter, and a fairly simple monetary market - there was no omnipresent consumer market. People produced many of the goods they used, themselves. Handcrafted, or machined consumer products existed, but they were most often the work of skilled tradespeople; time-consuming to produce, and subsequently quite expensive.

The prevalent belief system of the time (based on the idea of satisfaction, contentment, and even salvation, through commitment to work and honest

labour: the Protestant work ethic) also curtailed consumptive practices; the accumulation of goods and conspicuous consumption was looked upon in distaste, as a sign of idleness or excessive frivolity. Consumption, therefore, wasn't a priority or even a possibility for most people, and was a reality for only a small part of the general population (such as the wealthy); it was in no way as widespread as it is today.

In the past one hundred years however, the phenomenon of mass consumption has emerged; huge numbers of people now consume a variety of relatively cheap, industrially-produced products. A significant change in the social and economic order has occurred, where consumption has become "the idiom of daily life" (Ewen p. 187), and the means to live by. Mass consumption has radically altered the understandings, expectations, and mechanics of our society.

How did this happen? Where did this major shift in society come from? Well, the move to a culture of consumption was basically caused by the burgeoning needs and demands of production, the social turmoil and unrest resulting from a new industrial lifestyle, and the proliferation of advertising.

Mass consumption did not spontaneously occur as a direct result of the rise of mass production. The two phenomena are intimately linked -- mass consumption cannot occur without mass production -- but just because a product is produced doesn't mean it will be consumed. Before mass consumption could occur, there needed to be some sort of re-adjustment in the priorities and values of society.

The population needed to be persuaded to embrace a lifestyle of consumption before the amount being consumed would match the amount of products being produced. Back in the 1920's, when assembly-line production entered the scene, and the heads of industry began to comprehend their enormous production capabilities, they also came to the realization that their output would far surpass the size of the existing market, and would totally outstretch any prior-known level of consumer demand. Mass production could produce products in amounts far in excess to any pre-existing demand.

For the average capitalist, a firm believer in progress and the inevitable march towards modernity, this was a problem. There would be supply, but little demand; something had to be done! The public had to be made aware of the fantastic capabilities of production, and beyond that, must be made to respond to it: demand would have to be created. A crusade, of sorts, was then undertaken by the interests of production and industry to bring consumer demand into sync with the needs of production; there was far too much money to be made to simply sit back and let these productive capabilities go to waste (after all, profit is the name of the game). The thing was, an entire change in the behaviours and attitudes of the populace had to occur before mass consumption would match the potentials of production. This is where advertising came into play.

Advertising, and designed obsolescence in products (where products were designed to become obsolete or quickly disposed of), were to be the keys to a massive re-adjustment of the mass consciousness to the exigencies and needs of industry. Advertising, in conjunction with mass marketing, could

disseminate information about consumer products to a wide audience. It was an effective way to influence the decisions of individuals on a mass scale, and a proficient way to propagate new values and a consumption-oriented ideology to a large market. Advertising had the potential to promote mass consumption, all it needed was a sales pitch.

During the same time industry was getting its legs, the social structure of society was undergoing a substantial change. A move from an agrarian society to an industrial society was underway, and urban living and wage-work were becoming the norm. Large parts of the populace (especially in the United States) were moving into urban settings, and into industrial-related occupations. Changes in family patterns and stresses on traditional ways of living arose within the new urban social life, and during this transition many complained of a loss in meaningful relationships, from the workplace to their homes.