How We Choose: Want vs. Need, Axis Exclusive, January 18, 2004
http://www.axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/article_4705.shtml

From AxisofLogic.com
Economy

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Jan 18, 2004, 13:51

Two economist colleagues were working on the question why we Americans, other inhabitants of industrialized nations, indeed humans in general, so often act against our 'best' interests from consumption to electoral choices: a question worthy of consideration.

Once past, the hilarious derision in which purchasers of SUVs are so widely held, Malcolm Gladwell's article on SUVs (New Yorker, 12 Jan. 2004, p. 28) addresses this question in G. Clotaire Rapaille's counsel to the marketing industry.

Rapaille has been around and discussed in various other places in more detail. In short, he argues people, with enough freedom from need to be able to afford to, choose not on the basis of need but of want. Actually FDR blew it: there's a world of difference between 'want' and 'need', _vide infra_. The principal wants in the consumer economy, Rapaille demonstrates, are feelings, specifically a re-enforced positive self-image. Most consumers don't feel good about themselves, want to feel better and buy whatever fosters the image they want or want others to have of them. What they are buying into is not substantive need, but cosmetic; purveyors are the cosmeticians of their wish-fulfillment: painting their nails, plumping and primping their coiffure, nipping and tucking their fantasies about how others see them.

The yearning for 'instant-gratification' seems to fit into this model because what specifically is gratified? In food, it's the sense of well-being, no matter whether the foodstuff is nutritious. We evolved from half(or more)-starved scavengers knuckle-dragging across the African savanna in pursuit of whatever we could run down or scoop up. The dietary scarcities there, then, were sugars, fats and salts. Evolution favored those who craved and successfully obtained them. Now technology has found ways to circumvent the bother of providing these in a dietarily useful and integrated way. What afterall is the country fair's 'kettle corn' but carbohydrate saturated with a mish of all three.

A fantasy story I read in my youth described a cafeteria in which the favorite food of each customer was mind-read on entry and its illusion - sight, taste and texture - appeared on the tray at the cash register. The only substance actually provided was an unlimited supply of free biscuits packed with vitamins and essential nutrients. The customers dined on their desires and left the premises with a wonderfully light feeling, sated but not stuffed.

A fool and his or her money are soon parted. The societal flaw in the monetary economy, parting of these two, fool and money - of as much of the latter for as little in return as possible - is what profits. There
is no obligation on the part of the purveyor to provide anything of
durable use or substance in exchange for monetary returns, other than the
satisfaction of the instantaneous want, which, because most substantive
necessities are relatively easily met, is principally a feeling: good
about one's self. Marketers have known this for sometime; Rapaille merely
codifies what had been instinctively, unconsciously obvious to the
braying carney Barker and hawking fishmonger. Look at the advertising in
any Sunday supplement. The job of the advertiser is to create, provoke
and stimulate wants over and above needs; then exploit those wants for
the maximum monetary returns. Dubya's injunction to a hys-terror-ia
struck populace: Buy, buy, buy; bye-bye. Maintaining popular fears with
prolonged, state-sponsored terror-alerts provokes a purchasing-frenzy to
allay and defray sustained anxieties.

Why it is thought good-feeling can be bought rather than created? It's
far cheaper to provide essences of our favorite tastes than to grow
produce that integrates these in a nutritious matrix. The Mennonites and
Amish do things the hard way partly because the act of doing is what
contributes to substantive self-satisfaction. In "Working", Studs Terkel,
documents the satisfaction of bricklayers years later surveying the
longevity of their earliest constructs. How many of us can do the same?

Some of us approximate the same spirit and ethic in what we do, not
abjuring devices that make us more productive, but striving to create
things of substance and utility, not imagery and fantasy. What can most
workers point to and take pride in as they mature, if the body of their
work is the number of their fellows they've conned out of their pitiful
store of dinars? No wonder most workers can hardly wait until the end of
their shifts, when the whistle blows drop the hammer arcing in midswing
and hasten to their hovels to recharge their fantasy-lives with fast-food
and -entertainment. A government not of democracy but entertocracy: rule
by the best entertainment money can buy. Technology has made most of us
utterly destitute of pride or self-satisfaction with what we do; our
greatest needs are not food, clothing, shelter but a sense of being
meaningful and worthy of the resources we consume. Most of us utterly
lack a sense of being valued by others, not for the false-fantasies we
weave for our cohort, colleagues and companions, but for our doing and
being something others really need not just idly want.

Historically women's role was to create the atmosphere and illusion for
men of being wanted and valued. Even now, with ambigender roles, watch
the faces of men and women in a crowd; the majority are constantly on,
masques tuned to creating and maintaining an image, an illusion for
others: forced gaiety, wide, pasted-on smiles of adoring attentiveness.
Never fear, mommy/ daddy's here! "No hay banda"; there is no band.
Historically women's, now the job of each, is to bathe our others'
environs with light, sound and background music. But beware: there's
naught so furious as a dreaming practitioner of wish fulfillment for whom
the corresponding image, illusion and fantasy are not reciprocated. "I
don't want realism: I want magic!" - Blanche Dubois.

I think it's all out there how we choose economically or electorally if
you just look for it - like a Martian - as Eric Berne suggested. Pretend
you just landed here from another planet; try to infer from the peoples' actions what their motivations are. Works for me.

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