

BY EMILY THORNTON CALVO

# Buying with your

**Want to disconnect and relax?** You can turn off your cell phone, sign off the Internet and meditate with scented candles. But at some point you still need to go out and buy toothpaste, socks, coffee or maybe even a new car. Instead of a distraction from living a peaceful life that expresses your values, your purchasing decision can be an integral part of how you express yourself ... and inspire greater peace of mind.

## Purchasing with Passion

Preserve the rain forest. Fight breast cancer. End the war. If you believe in a cause, there's probably a product you can buy to help make a difference—and purchasing the product is a simple way to enhance your feelings of purpose.

“Increasingly, consumers are taking the lead to find products that are meaningful,” says Al Rosenbloom, Ph.D., associate professor at Saint Xavier University’s Graham School of Management. For example, the proliferation of pink ribbons on packaging signals buyers to help fight breast cancer. Other causes are stepping up as well.

Starbucks supports fair-trade coffee by purchasing only from coffee producers who pay fair-trade prices. Sometimes values are inherent in the product itself. Tom’s of Maine produces personal-hygiene products, such as toothpaste, to attract people concerned about artificial or animal ingredients and chemicals. Need phone service? Working Assets supports more than 35 progressive, nonprofit organizations. Even a credit card choice can be an affirmation of values. And the success of products such as Toyota’s hybrid Prius and composting toilets offer environmentally conscious consumers opportunities to, quite literally, “go” with their values.



# Heart

Buying with your heart requires that you also buy with your brain. Make the extra effort to do a little research. Sometimes you may pay a higher price to cover the cost of the item, the program and the donation, so find out the percentage of the money earmarked to support the cause.

“Recently the (PRODUCT) RED™ campaign attracted a variety of companies to market products that support the fight against AIDS in Africa,” adds Rosenbloom. (PRODUCT) RED helps raise awareness and donations for the Global Fund by teaming with brands such as Gap, Apple and Motorola to create (PRODUCT) RED-branded products. However, recent tallies show the cost of Gap’s campaign is far beyond the amount being donated to Global Fund.

“Recently the (PRODUCT) **RED** campaign attracted a variety of companies to market products that support the fight against AIDS in Africa.”

— Al Rosenbloom, Ph.D., associate professor

Liberal causes aren’t the only ones represented in today’s campaigns. “Evangelical Christians command a huge amount of money in the marketplace and also want to express their values,” says Rosenbloom. “For example, the Lord’s Gym Inc. is a nonprofit fitness center formed to teach young people how to make moral choices consistent with conservative Christian values.”

Another way to “buy with your heart” is to purchase items directly from reputable nonprofits. For example, when you need a gift for a tree-hugging friend, you can shop the World Wildlife Fund’s gift center on its Web site. Other nonprofits work with affiliates to go beyond the T-shirt and produce everything from stuffed animals to stationery to books and CDs. You can always donate directly in someone’s name as well. You’ll get a warm feeling—and your friend will appreciate your “two-way” generosity.

Peace of mind can—almost—be purchased directly as well. In recognition of our extreme connectedness, new products and services are promising opportunities to connect with ourselves. “Many spas and cruises have repositioned their services to address the need to take time to meditate or reconnect with a healthier lifestyle,” adds Rosenbloom, “especially among baby boomers who can afford a few luxuries.”

## New and Improved Consumer Power

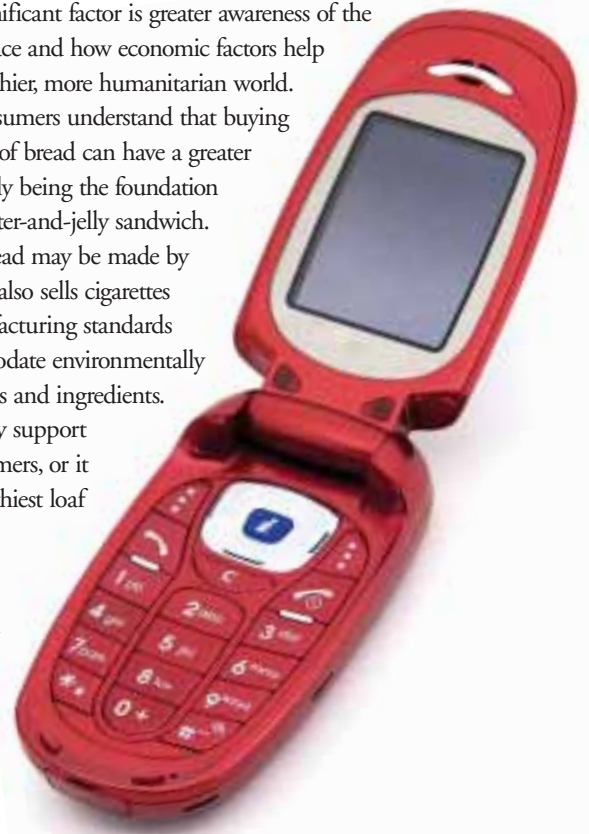
Market changes drive companies and consumers to relate differently to products. One major factor is increased competition. Previous generations didn’t have 10 different brands of toothpaste to choose from—and competition puts more power in the hands of consumers.

“Before World War II, there wasn’t that much competition,” says Sidney J. Levy, Ph.D., distinguished professor of marketing at the University of Arizona. “After the war ended, prosperity inspired a consumer revolution, and more competition led to innovations to win fickle consumers. Since then, you can find clubs, magazines, rewards programs and other strategies that foster relationships between products and consumers.”

“Consumer publications and the Internet have made it easier than ever for consumers to be informed about their buying decisions,” says Neil Younkin, Ph.D., associate professor at the Graham School. “Products are not only competing with other items on the shelves, they compete with similar items around the world.” There are dozens of choices in nearly every category—from phones to cars to cough syrups—and Internet shopping has multiplied the available options.

Another significant factor is greater awareness of the global marketplace and how economic factors help or hinder a healthier, more humanitarian world. This means consumers understand that buying a particular loaf of bread can have a greater effect than simply being the foundation for a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich. Likewise, the bread may be made by a company that also sells cigarettes or whose manufacturing standards do not accommodate environmentally friendly processes and ingredients. Its company may support independent farmers, or it may be the healthiest loaf on the shelf.

This intense competition and heightened consumer awareness forces marketers to better define



“Consumer publications and the Internet have made it easier than ever for consumers to be informed about their buying decisions.”

— Neil Younkin, Ph.D., associate professor



Pam Cruz '02

themselves and give customers added benefits—and consumers demand it. But first marketers work hard to better understand their customers.

“We look more closely at market segments,” says **Pam Cruz '02**, who earned her MBA from the Graham School and is now the director of marketing for GT Mechanical Projects & Design in Homer Glen. “It’s no longer about your age, gender and location. Marketers want to know about your lifestyle, your hobbies and your values.”

The success of campaigns such as breast cancer awareness show that consumers understand we are all connected—and that purchasing power ultimately can impact the world, especially when embraced by many. The goal is to know as much as possible about products and the purchasing implications.

## Branding and Values

Branding has a long history of giving a product a personality to which consumers can relate. As early as 1955, there was an awareness of the relevance of brands. “... each product or brand exists in people’s minds as a symbolic entity, an integrated result of all their experiences with it,” says Levy. In *Living with Television* (1962), Levy and his co-author presented the first qualitative study for Coca-Cola Co. on why people drink soft drinks, a study for AT&T on the meaning of the telephone, and a study for FTD on the poignancy of flowers as symbolic of the life cycle.

“One resulting notion, then, of an advertisement being not an isolated communication but ‘an investment in the long-run reputation of the brand,’ was seized upon by the advertising community,” says Levy. “We came to regard

almost all of our consumer studies as exercises in the interpretation of symbols.” Over time, the symbol and resulting emotions become an attribute of the product.

Brand symbols communicate with us in very meaningful ways. They touch us to the core. Over time, they can generate trust and confidence in a product. Therefore, marketers define their products with extensive branding campaigns that give products specific personality traits with which consumers can connect. Supporting causes that represent the values of their market adds a dimension to the brand that creates an even-more-powerful relationship. All of a sudden, buying an everyday item becomes a statement of purpose.

**“Like any consumer, I’m willing to pay more to support something I believe in.”**

— Pam Cruz ’02, marketing director

Service industries also recognize the value of creating brands that represent values. “Our company stands for quality service, and this, along with our reputation, has inspired a lot of trust from our customers,” says Cruz.

“In health care, opportunities to build the ‘brand’ begin with what hospital one chooses to have a baby and continues through ER visits for bumps and bruises through heart care,” says Mary Zokan, director of marketing at Rush-Copley Medical Center in Chicago’s far-western suburbs. “We work to build a brand that people will trust over generations.”

In addition, today’s consumers have become more demanding about what they expect from products and services. There is greater awareness of corporate social responsibility and ethical corporate behavior—and

consumers want to believe their purchases support an organization that respects and acts with social responsibility.

Business people are consumers like everyone else. They want to do what they can to make a difference—and make money while they do it. Leveraging their brand to attract business, while raising money for a cause, is an effective strategy.

“Like any consumer, I’m willing to pay more to support something I believe in,” says Cruz, “and so are other consumers. We choose brands we trust and that have proven reliable over the years.”

### Marketers Make it Easy

If buying with your heart sounds like another thing to add to your to-do list, don’t worry. You don’t have to work very hard to find products that affirm your values. Marketers and their products will find you. This is one reason why direct mail, via traditional mail and e-mail, is more prevalent than ever—because it so easily can be targeted and reach the people who want the information. You do have to work, however, to know if the messages are true.

In addition, customer relationship management, or CRM, is a marketing strategy that uses databases to identify customers’ needs—so companies can respond appropriately and win loyalty over the long term. For example, if you buy a book on amazon.com, the Web site will suggest other books that may interest you, based on your choice. Needless to say, you’ll want to revisit the Web site, because—like good friends—“they” know what you like.

“We’re learning about our customers, so we can develop solutions that make people’s lives easier and reach them with meaningful messages,” says Cruz. “We want to create long-term relationships built on trust.”



### Making Actions More Meaningful

The next time you feel overwhelmed, you can turn off the TV, toss direct mail and shut down your computer, which is a great way to get a little reprieve from the clutter of our 21st-century world and regain a sense of meaning. You can also make a point to purchase fair-trade coffee with your “save the whales” credit card—because ensuring your actions support your values is the foundation for living a life of integrity.

## You Want Integrity with That?

It isn't easy to make the right choices. The consumer's challenge is to make sure his or her purchase supports the intended causes. For example, while breast cancer has become a primary focus of many cause-related marketing campaigns, displaying a pink ribbon on packaging doesn't necessarily mean the brand benefits the cause. Before opening your wallet, it's smart to do some research:

- Find out how much money from each product actually supports the cause. Often a product Web site will contain this information.
- What aspect of the cause is your money supporting? For example, is researching a cure for a disease more important to you than lobbying for medical policy changes or covering other types of expenses?
- Is there a maximum amount to be donated? Some companies place a cap on the amount of their donation, which makes additional sales irrelevant after that amount.
- How much money was spent marketing the product? Promotional campaign costs can be higher than the actual donation, often delivering greater benefits to the sponsor than to the charity.
- What is the company doing to assure its products are not contributing to the problems? That is, if a purchase helps fund an environmental organization, is the manufacturer vigilant about green production processes?

- If a company has been sold, does the new management maintain the same values to a similar degree?

The answers to these questions may not affect your buying decision, because either way, your purchase may support a cause you believe in ... but a little scrutiny will make you more confident in your choices.

“There's a difference between brands that have a heritage of supporting specific values and a short-term campaign,” says Rosenbloom. Both may benefit a cause, but a brand committed to supporting specific values over the long term earns greater trust and loyalty than a short-term promotion for a cause. The challenge for marketers is to operate on a foundation of integrity that connects and communicates their values in an authentic way—while remaining profitable. **SXM**

### ADDITIONAL SOURCES

[www.benjerry.com](http://www.benjerry.com)  
[www.gap.com](http://www.gap.com)  
[www.lordsgymfitness.com](http://www.lordsgymfitness.com)  
[www.thebodyshop.com](http://www.thebodyshop.com)  
[www.thinkbeforeyoupink.org](http://www.thinkbeforeyoupink.org)