

Group Asks Consumers to Buy Nothing

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It's not exactly the kind of message they like to hear on Wall Street these days, but that's just the way a Canadian group likes it.

It's a campaign called Buy Nothing Day, and as its name implies it's meant to be a call to consumers everywhere — particularly Americans — to reconsider their spending habits and take a moment to consider what rampant consumerism does to the Earth.

And if preaching the anti-consumerist message to shop-happy Americans wasn't already a tough-enough sale, the event will take place on what is traditionally one of the busiest shopping day of the year — the day after Thanksgiving.

According to the group behind the effort, Vancouver-based Adbusters, as many as one million people in 65 countries are expected to participate in this year's Buy Nothing Day campaign.

Representatives of the business community are not impressed: "I think it's a very bad idea," says Hank Cox, Director of Communications for the National Association of Manufacturers. "Consumer purchasing power is the one thing that has kept the economy growing."

Cox says that he rejects the notion that consumer spending is harmful and calls the Adbuster's effort a "protest against modernity."

"I admit, there's a certain cheekiness and strategic value to the day after Thanksgiving," says Adbuster's founder Kalle Lasn, a long-time political activist who has been behind several anti-consumer and ecological causes over the years.

'Profound and Flaky'

While the group's activities are not likely to lead to street fighting, they may at least be good for a little street theater.

This year's effort, says Lasn, will have campaigners dressing up as shopping police and handing out "fines" to unwary shoppers lugging swollen bags. They also plan to have participants in pig masks lurking at major shopping malls, ready to snort and jeer at those they perceive as over-zealous shoppers.

The Buy Nothing Day concept began on a whim in 1992 when Lasn and a group of hard-core Northwest environmentalists were brainstorming ideas how to tackle what they saw as a growing problem of over-consumption in America.

After several lattes, one of them says they should keep it simple: just call it "Buy Nothing Day," he suggested. "Right from the start those three words had a sort of magic ring to them," says Lasn. "Very profound and flaky at the same time."

Flaky and, some might say, even vicious. The campaign has, in the past, taken shots at beloved American icons, as well as cultural and political figures. For example, the organization's poster ads have featured a fattened Statue of Liberty under a banner that reads "Boycott America," as well as a Santa Claus in a Zen-like pose meant to inspire gift-buying restraint.

But Lasn, a former advertising executive, says that the Adbusters attention-getting antics are meant to be humorous, even if they intend the underlying message to be taken seriously.

"We want the ads to provoke, to antagonize, to create vigorous debate," he says.

Adbuster's latest media effort is a short TV spot featuring a burping pig emerging from a map of North America. The ad compares Americans' level of consumption to other countries such as India and exhorts North Americans to consume less.

So far, the ad has only run once, on CNN's Lou Dobb's Moneyline.

Rich vs. Poor

While Adbusters has seen steady growth in membership since it began, several events have had a big impact on spreading the buy-nothing message, mostly via the Internet.

The first came in 1999, when anti-globalism protesters took to the streets of Seattle to protest the World Trade Organization. Users to the group's Web site nearly doubled overnight and the group saw a dramatic increase in donations.

Then came Sept. 11, which struck a chord with many people who say the terrorist attacks need to be viewed within a larger framework of problems resulting from a growing economic imbalance in the world.

"We feel the root cause of Sept. 11 and war on terrorism is due to huge imbalance between rich and poor," says Lasn. "Let's face it, with 20 percent of the world's population consuming 86 percent of goods, this creates fertile ground for fanatics."

This year's Buy Nothing Day campaign skewers the Bush administration's post-9/11 call to consume more.

"We don't like this patriotic duty to go out and buy stuff," Lasn says.