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An Awakened Conscience

By Tracy Mullin



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Every year about this time, I end up with 20 boxes of Thin Mints and a half-dozen boxes of Samoas. I truly am a Girl Scout's dream. But for me, the cookies are secondary; buying a trunkload of shortbread simply makes me feel good.

Today's consumers operate in much the same way. As our shoppers vote with their wallets, retailers are recognizing that customers want them to make a difference.

A decade ago, Ben & Jerry's was one of just a few socially active companies. In a recent interview, co-founder Ben Cohen said that being socially responsible gives businesses a "spiritual connection" with their customers that advertising cannot buy. I think he's right.



Today, many retailers have begun offering products to support certain causes. Starbucks contributes 5 cents from the sale of each bottle of Ethos water to help children around the world get clean drinking water. IKEA donates \$2 from the sale of specific stuffed animals to help children recovering from armed conflicts in Angola and Uganda. Target offers a First Aid and Emergency Preparedness Kit and gives \$10 from each \$30 kit to the Red Cross.

To differentiate their merchandise, cosmetics companies and specialty stores also are embracing the trend. Estée Lauder produced its own line of products to support breast cancer research. The Body Shop is selling lip care sticks featuring the number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline on its label, donating \$2 from each sale to support the hotline.

Companies also are marketing goods that improve others' quality of life. Macy's carries products made by Rwandan basket weavers. Wal-Mart sells fair-trade coffee from Brazilian farmers in Sam's Club. Saks Fifth Avenue offers Bono's Edun jeans, created from organic materials in family-run factories in South America and Africa.

While retailers are embarking on their own initiatives, they are also

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working together to monitor how their merchandise is being produced. That's why NRF, in partnership with Reebok, the Retail Council of Canada and World Monitors Inc., spearheaded a program to help retailers monitor workplace conditions overseas. Called the Fair Factories Clearinghouse, this collaborative industry effort created a system for managing and sharing audit information and is improving factory conditions worldwide.

Every now and then, these societal gestures pay off not only with goodwill, but with increased sales. A case in point: after launching its Self Esteem Fund this year with a \$50,000 donation and campaign about "real beauty," Dove saw sales of products in its ads skyrocket 600 percent.

Long after remembering what they bought, consumers will remember how you made them feel. Participating in charitable causes is one way to remind customers that we are all dedicated to making this world a better place. The cookies are just a bonus.



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