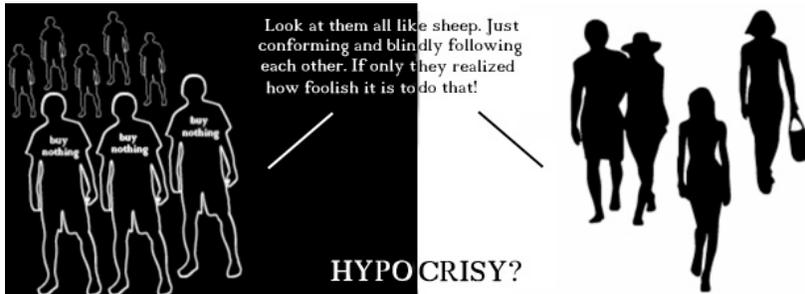




november 28, 2008

Buy Nothing Day? I Don't Buy It



Today is Buy Nothing Day in North America. If you're unaware of Buy Nothing Day (is it comfortable under that rock :) here's something directly from the Adbusters press release

Now in its 17th year, Buy Nothing Day is celebrated every November by environmentalists, social activists and concerned citizens in over 65 countries around the world. Over the years, Buy Nothing Day (followed by Buy Nothing Christmas) has exploded into a global movement, inspiring the world's citizens to live more simply and buy a whole lot less.

While Adbusters Magazine did not technically start BND (this credit belongs to Vancouverite, [Ted Dave](#)) it sure has spearheaded its promotion. The issue of consumerism, overconsumption and BND sure do stir up emotions, as is obvious from the [comments on this article](#) from two years ago. And it should. It's the kind of issue we must face, and especially in these tough economic times. While I wholeheartedly support the sentiment and the righteous goal of BND, which is of course to bring awareness that we buy too much, I can't help but feel uneasy about a few things:

1) The fact that it's promoted by Adbusters Magazine

As nice as it is that this Canadian-based not-for-profit has become so popular, and I've enjoyed the magazine, it's starting to feel fake and contrived. It seems that Adbusters has become the very thing it claims to be fighting. They sell their own shoe, for crying out loud. Sure, it's described as anti-brand, and the un-swoosher (to combat Nike's alleged corporate atrocities) but what makes buying that shoe any different than choosing some other company's shoe? I know, I know. The conditions under which they're made are (supposedly) better, the money will go towards promoting more Adbusters-related stuff and it's just plain cool to be a rebel. But condemning marketers who "arbitrarily zero in on some emotion that [means something to young people](#)" and "attach that emotion to [their] brand" (as Adbusters founder Kalle Lasn has) seems hypocritical when this shoe is marketed in much the same way. I compare Adbusters' gradual transformation into the thing it opposed to Kurt Cobain's transition to a mainstream artist (but he seemed to realize it). And both have their own shoe. I kid you not. Behold the [Chuck Taylor All Star Kurt Cobain](#).

2) Do people participate to be a rebel?

Again, I welcome a decrease in consumption. I really do. And I certainly don't like the constant bombardment of marketing. But will people jump on this bandwagon (secretly hiding the little purchases they made) in order to be part of a movement that is rebellious and opposes "the man", returning to business as usual the following day. We don't need a Buy Nothing Day, we need a Buy Less Life. I'm sure that's the goal of BND, but I'm not so sure it accomplishes that goal. I hate to be cynical on this one, but it feels like a bit of a ploy to keep Adbusters in the spotlight, selling magazines. In the book [The Rebel Sell](#) (I suggest reading this) the authors address the inability of counter-cultural movements to effect true change. From Wikipedia:



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"The system" is not something that seeks conformity, but rather the opposite, it seeks individuality and the competition for distinction. To support this claim, Potter and Heath look at American Beauty, Fight Club, The Matrix, and Adbusters, all of which are supposedly counter-cultural, but popular in the mainstream. The capitalist system is not trying to stamp out individuality; rather, a force of social distinction drives the market. Individuals are in constant pursuit to "outcast" each other.

Exactly. Is BND just an extension?

3) Should we be taking money out of the market right now?

Given the state of the economy right now, is it advisable to NOT invest in businesses, even for ONE day? I think it would make more sense to spend money more wisely. I'm not an economist, but I think there are better options than not buying a single thing on that day. Often, protests can lead to judging and criticizing those who are shopping on "BND", when they likely have no idea about the initiative. To quote the author from the piece I linked to earlier:

That's why I use Buy Nothing Day for what I think are better ends. I buy "consciously" all day long -- from getting a fair trade coffee at a locally owned shop in the morning, to picking up a few Christmas gifts made by independent artists and crafters in the afternoon.

I'd rather support a local business that deserves my money than simply participate in what honestly amounts to an empty gesture for many people. If you believe in Buy Nothing Day, cool. I once did, and I guess I'm not totally opposed to it now. But it's always a good idea to examine why you believe in certain things, and to question the motives of those who promote them. Blindly following Adbusters (and those who espouse their messages) isn't necessarily better than blindly following corporations.

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You have very valid points. I think the concept behind BND is a valid one, and for those participating for the first time, it's a chance to discover how little we really need to consume. It's a chance to see whether we can, one step at a time, join the Buy less Life campaign. Until then, people will join bandwagons for whatever reason. Hopefully, the outcomes will be worth it.

Posted by Farzana on December 15, 2008 10:48 AM

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