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BAY AREA

Out of the retail rat race

Consumer group doesn't buy notion that new is better

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John Perry and his son, Ben Perry-Picciotto, shop at a San Francisco scrap yard. Perry, a Compact member, buys only secondhand. Chronicle photo by Deanne Fitzmaurice



Chronicle / Deanne Fitzmaurice

While many people will spend countless hours this year lining up at Wal-Mart and maxing out their credit cards at Nordstrom, a small Bay Area group has declared it will do just the opposite.

About 50 teachers, engineers, executives and other professionals in the Bay Area have made a vow to not buy anything new in 2006 -- except food, health and safety items and underwear.

"We're people for whom recycling is no longer enough," said one of the members of the fledgling movement, John Perry, who works in marketing at a high-tech company. "We're trying to get off the first-market consumerism grid, because consumer culture is destroying the world."

They call themselves the Compact. They have a blog, a Yahoo group and monthly meetings to reaffirm their commitment to the rule, which is to never buy anything new. "I didn't buy a pair of shoes today," said Compacter Shawn Rosenmoss, an engineer and a San Francisco resident of the Bernal Heights neighborhood. "They were basically a \$300 pair of clodhoppers. But they were really nice and really comfortable, and I haven't bought new shoes for a while. But I didn't buy them. That's a big part of the Compact -- we show that we're not powerless over our purchasing."

Compacters can get as much as they want from thrift shops, Craigslist, freecycle.org, eBay and flea markets, as long as the items are secondhand. And when they're in doubt, they turn to their fellow Compacters for guidance.

"We had a little crisis when Matt and Sarah had to replace their shower curtain liner and we said no," said Perry, who lives in Bernal Heights. "But we put the word out and someone found one for them. It's like the Amish -- we help each other out. We raise a barn every week."

The Compact started two years ago when Perry and a group of his friends, who were tired of devoting so much of their time and money on items they don't need, vowed to go six months without buying anything new.

American consumerism, they say, has led to global environmental and socioeconomic crises, and the only way to reverse it is to stop buying into it.

The Compact -- named after the revolutionary credo of the Mayflower pilgrims -- proved immensely popular and quickly increased its membership.

Then one couple remodeled their house and couldn't find used drywall. After that, "it all started to unravel," Perry said.

But after a breather, the group decided to recommit and try to expand its membership.

Kate Boyd, a drama teacher at Lick-Wilmerding High School in San Francisco, said she enjoys the extra time, money and perspective that a consumer-free life brings.

"It's just a relief to get away from the pressure to always have new clothes, gadgets and other things we don't need," she said. "And I find that I have more money to spend on the dried cherries for my Manhattans."

The Compact is part of the larger trend of consumers beginning to "tread gently on our planet," said Peter Sealey, adjunct professor of marketing at

the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley.

"It sounds marvelous. It's a wonderful example for all of us," said Sealey, a former chief of marketing at Coca-Cola and Columbia Pictures. "It's a crystal-clear statement about what can be done to get us away from being a disposable society."

The boom in green building, Oakland's recent crackdown on fast-food litter and the surge in biofuel-powered cars are all part of the movement toward more responsible consumerism, he said.

Northern California is often at the forefront of environmental and social trends, and the Compact is likely to garner a devoted following, he said.

"Will the Compact ever become mainstream? I don't think so, but it's an excellent way to bring attention to the reality that we need to be more gentle with our resources."

One especially appealing aspect of the Compact is its social component, members say. Fellow Compacters offer advice, moral support, help locating needed items and partners for thrift-store runs.

One couple, Matt Eddy and Sarah Pelmas, met through the Compact and got married six months ago.

But the main advantage of being in a group is "you can brag to someone," said Boyd.

Perry agreed.

"After a while you get this bravado. You want to brag more and more," he said. "I found a Razor scooter for \$15 at Thrift Town. That was great, but it doesn't top the free sewing machine I got on Craigslist. The stakes just keep getting higher."

Perry, who said he loves to shop, went into withdrawal the first few weeks of entering the Compact. For many people, shopping is a recreational and social activity that almost transcends consumerism. Boyd described it as an urge to "line the nest."

"But after a few weeks the buzzing in your head subsides," Perry said. "Although if I continue to shop crazily at thrift stores, is that any better?"

He thought about it for a moment.

"I think it is."