

# 'Shoptimism' delves into consumer habits

Why do Americans continue to buy, even when we are acutely aware of the detrimental impact that it will have on our livelihood?

And why does the economic "big picture" seem to have such a nominal influence on our personal spending habits?

These questions are at the heart of "Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep On Buying No Matter What," the latest book by Lee Eisenberg, whose previous bestsellers include "Breaking Eighty" and "The Number."

Eisenberg argues convincingly that shopping is much more fundamental to defining who we are than is often recognized or acknowledged. Rather than being motivated by mere necessity, he asserts that most Americans buy for status, a fondness for the unique, and for the social and emotional benefits that we seem to derive through the simple act of acquiring things.

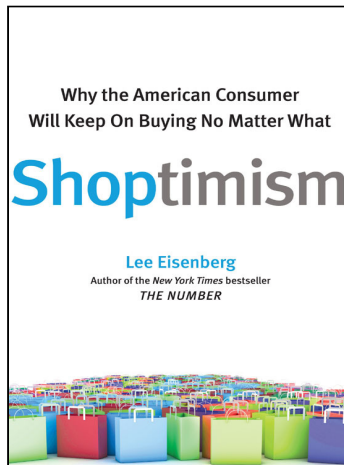
Eisenberg is currently a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a former editor-in-chief of Esquire magazine and served as an executive vice president for Land's End as well as an editorial consultant for Time Inc.

"Shoptimism" is a wonderful mix of economics and psychology. The book is comprised of two major sections; the first consists of eight chapters that deal with the selling side of consumerism. The latter half of the book is comprised of an equal number of chapters that address buying behavior.

A fair number of pages are devoted to the issue of needs versus wants. "Yesterday's wants have a way of turning into things we just have to have," Eisenberg writes. "Our professed need for a computer zoomed from virtually zero in 1983 to about one in two of us by 2006."

Along these same lines, Eisenberg offers an intriguing explanation of how we decide how much something is worth: "Reference prices become anchored in our heads chiefly because we shop a great deal and over time learn what things are generally worth." At the same time, however, he cautions that "Retailers know how to implant reference prices."

According to Eisenberg, most consumers can be categorized into one of two basic types: classic buyers and romantic buyers. Classic buyers tend to be very price-conscious and practical; they have a definite preference for "tried and true" products. Romantic buyers, on the other hand, love to have more



*"Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep On Buying No Matter What," by Lee Eisenberg. New York: Free Press, 2009. 334 pages, \$26.*

choices, like extra features, and have an affinity for products that are "new and different."

Although Eisenberg infuses extensive academic research throughout "Shoptimism," while you are actually reading the book you get the distinct impression that you are having a personal conversation with the author. Entertaining and colorful examples permeate the narrative in a way that seems to bring the words on each page to life.

A point Eisenberg makes pervasively is that impulsive buying is continuing to increase in American society — the recent economic downturn notwithstanding. A primary contributing factor to this trend has been the explosive proliferation credit cards have experienced since their initial introduction in 1949.

In a particularly engaging discussion on the reasons people spend money on non-essentials, he uses model railroading enthusiasts to illustrate an important point.

Employing Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs as a conceptual framework, he explains how spending money on this kind of pastime provides a connection to the real world and fulfills the need for love and belonging, self-esteem and ultimately self-actualization.

In "Shoptimism," Eisenberg obviously set out to try to make sense of consumer behavior in America. More precisely, he wanted to explain how we make buying decisions and how we are constantly manipulated by marketers and advertisers.

In large measure, he succeeds.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.