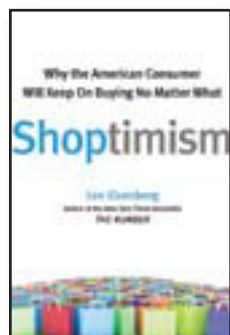




Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep on Buying No Matter What

By Lee Eisenberg, 2009, Free Press, 334 pages, \$26, ISBN: 0743296257



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 best sellers 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.

Shoptimism is a wonderful mix of economics and psychology. The book is composed of two main sections. The first consists of eight chapters that deal with the selling side of consumerism. The latter half of the book features 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. “[O]ur 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 for how we decide something’s 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, he cautions, “Retailers know how to implant reference prices.”

As might be expected, Eisenberg also spends a disproportionate amount of time delving into the still-emerging field of behavioral economics. “Behavioral economics is dedicated to the proposition that irrational decision making is not just human, it’s pretty much the human norm,” he observes. “It’s not surprising that behavioral economics — in demystified form — receives a steady stream of media coverage.”

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 choices, are drawn to extra features and possess an affinity for products that are “new and different.”

Although Eisenberg weaves extensive academic research throughout *Shoptimism*, while 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, seemingly bringing the words on each page to life.

A pervasive point Eisenberg makes is that impulsive buying continues to increase in American society, the recent economic downturn notwithstanding. A primary contributing factor to this trend is the explosive proliferation of credit cards since their initial introduction in

1949. A credit card “erases the barriers that separate self-regulation from self-indulgence,” Eisenberg observes. “There’s irrefutable evidence that packing a card, or four, or a dozen or more, increases personal spending.”

Further, Eisenberg carefully documents how excessive shopping can legitimately be considered an unhealthy addiction. But unlike other self-destructive behaviors, uninhibited spending tends to be sanctioned and even actively promoted by many of our societal institutions. “Compulsive Buying Disorder is currently under consideration for inclusion in the 2011 edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)*,” Eisenberg notes. “This would be a big deal.”

In a particularly engaging discussion of the reasons people spend money on nonessentials, he uses model railroading enthusiasts to illustrate an important point. Employing Abraham Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs as a conceptual framework, Eisenberg 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.

Shoptimism also contains an inordinate number of fascinating (and potentially controversial) marketing research findings. For instance, Eisenberg cites studies showing that the Jewish community patronizes nightclubs more than Protestant or Catholic communities, African Americans buy a lower percentage of ground and whole-bean coffee than non-African Americans, and women who work in offices are considerably more likely to wish they had “different faces” than women who live on farms. On the surface, these kinds of examples might appear to be irrelevant factoids, but Eisenberg demonstrates how advertisers use this type of data to effectively target

and tap into specific market segments.

In *Shoptimism*, Eisenberg 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.

Bounce: Living the Resilient Life

By Robert J. Wicks, 2010, Oxford University Press, 232 pages, \$21.95, ISBN: 978-0195367683



Robert Wicks has written a reflective book for counseling professionals seeking personal change and growth. Wicks draws on his significant experience

as a caregiver for helping professionals in sharing ideas on preventing burnout, increasing self-awareness and nurturing resilience. Throughout the book's 200-plus pages, readers are given a glimpse into such assorted topics as chronic and acute stress, maintaining a balanced circle of friends, contemporary positive psychology and mindfulness meditation.

Wicks inspires readers to listen to, reflect on and wake up to their inner life. He maintains a spirit of open exploration, encouraging readers to learn from the inherent stress in life and to work to remain productive and creative. Using lists, self-assessments and

questionnaires, Wicks guides readers on a personal journey of self-reflection while encouraging them to develop a personalized self-care protocol and renewal program and to engage in daily debriefings. Whether the reader's goal is to combat compassion fatigue or to increase self-knowledge, everyone will find something of value in these pages.

Although *Bounce* has value for anyone wishing to become more conscious and open to life's experiences, the information provided is particularly relevant for those in the helping professions. Wicks warns that "no matter how prepared we are, we are not immune to the psychological and spiritual dangers that arise in living a full life of involvement with others." Sharing personal stories of triumph and struggle, he offers a guide for those lost in the darkness, as well as those fearful of being pulled in.

Readers with an orientation toward self-reflection will find this book an important companion in the search for personal growth. For those who are skeptical, the author skillfully addresses objections such as lack of time or perceived difficulty meditating or reflecting. He gently encourages readers to reassess the importance of silence and solitude (pathways to creating a resilient inner life) and offers structured and informal exercises as practice.

Sprinkled throughout the chapters are references to an eclectic array of authors, including Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön, singer-songwriter Joan Baez and mindfulness expert Jon Kabat-Zinn, delightfully acknowledging wisdom in all its forms. Although primarily written for those seeking personal change, counselor educators may also find this book helpful

in mentoring counseling students as they embark on their own journeys of self-reflection. Counseling professionals searching for self-knowledge will find this book instructive, insightful and compelling.

Reviewed by Claudia Lingertat-Putnam, associate professor of counseling, the College of St. Rose, Albany, N.Y.

Ten More Good Years (DVD)

Produced and directed by Michael Jacoby, 2007, Lookout Films, \$195 (educational institutions); \$75 (community and nonprofit groups), color, 71 minutes, ISBN: 646-319-7965




The study of gerontology is expanding rapidly among counselors, in part because the U.S. population is aging, but also because there is a lack of adequate universal social programming for older adults. Yet often forgotten or intentionally ignored in the research and programming for seniors are the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. *Ten More Good Years* highlights this neglect by incorporating inspiring and emotional case examples, introducing viewers to community resources in select cities, explaining U.S. political movements and laws, and showcasing successful advocacy projects.

In its 71 minutes, this documentary touches on a range of issues facing

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the aging LGBT population: historic prejudice, partnership and family relationships, poverty in old age, mental health implications, physical safety, access to health care and residential services, purposeful abandonment of political action by government and professional advocacy needs. In spite of the multifarious problems the documentary addresses, inspiration shines through in the support that the LGBT community as a whole provides to its seniors. As explained in the film, what society fails to create for minority populations, the minority community does for itself. Such programs include an LGBT intergenerational friendship program, LGBT senior housing, mental health support groups and gay-friendly professional workers.

Although the information and statistics presented are striking, the film's true beauty is its showcase of four unique and diverse individuals who allow viewers to empathize with their daily struggles while simultaneously sharing in their joys and triumphs. Laced into the four case studies are interviews with expert researchers,

organization and community leaders, and professional advocates. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this documentary is its ability to educate and inspire rather than to portray a general sense of victimization. Many of the issues the film presents are not unique to LGBT elders. Some of the issues are faced by a majority of older adults, but it just so happens that these same issues are exacerbated for sexual minorities. Other issues explored in *Ten More Good Years* are experienced by sexual minorities of all ages. The film delicately sets aside the controversy surrounding sexual and religious morals by maintaining a paradigm built on legality and ethics. It is through these vantage points that viewers can abandon sympathy for empathy and reflect professionally without the limitations of defensiveness.

As the U.S. population ages and the sexual minority community increases its visibility, mental health professionals will gain more awareness of the challenges, needs, strengths and resources of these groups. If we strive to grow in cultural competence, we

must be willing to understand and meet the needs of the elderly population, the LGBT population and the elderly LGBT population. Viewing this award-winning documentary is both educational and inspiring, not only for counseling professionals but for anyone who supports the population presented in this film. No longer can ignorance be an excuse for ignoring.

Reviewed by Ryan L. Knigge, intensive treatment services therapist and sex offender therapist, Sioux Falls, S.D. ♦

Ruth Harper is ending her tenure as the column editor for *Resource Reviews* after having served in that capacity since September 2006. Both *Counseling Today* and the American Counseling Association thank her for her creativity and the dedication she showed to bringing new resources to the attention of ACA members.

Letters to the editor:
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