

Help For Recovering Consumers

Just in time (maybe too late!) for Christmas - a book I was given on "**Consumer Detox**".

We talk about consumerism -- but what is it? Well, it's about addiction to shopping. But it's more than this. It's about trying to find our identity only by the things we choose to buy.

And, of course, big business is happy for us to do this -- it keeps the profits coming in. So here are a few of the tricks they use to promote our addiction --

The Promise -- example -- when is the car not a car? When it's an adventurous dream machine of course. Car manufacturers know that just saying their new car is like the other ones only a different shape isn't enough to make us buy. Neither is "This car is great and has a sunroof". So what they offer is a concept, a feel. The promise is about establishing an association in our minds -- a stunning location, the face of a celebrity. Whatever it is, when you buy the product, you somehow buy into all the rest as well.

The New -- the truth is any one product becomes boring after a while. The key is to keep offering us more things than we could ever become bored of. By the time we are even slightly fed up with our last purchase, the new purchase is already on the horizon. And the new one always delivers more. It will be brighter, better, a new flavour, the next great thing.

And to help the process along there is accelerated obsolescence. Despite the promises of quality, often what we buy runs out faster, wears out quicker, or needs upgrading sooner than it used to. This keeps the profit margins high.

The Bluff -- example -- the Technological Bluff -- the claim that just because something is automated, or more complicated, or computerised, it will make our lives better. Men, in particular are suckers for better gadgets. What if the razor didn't have one blade, but two or three or even five?

The Bombardment -- In 2008 companies in the US and Europe spent \$ 537,000,000,000 on advertising and marketing. It must work. By the age of 20, the average American has been exposed to nearly a million advertising messages. We will spend a total of one year of our lives watching TV adverts. Two thirds of newspaper space and 40% of our mail is unsolicited advertising.

The Threat -- example -- often what looks like an offer is actually a threat. The picture of children riding safely in the back of the car (you wouldn't want anything to happen to them would you?). Then there is the threat of being out of date -- of not having kept up with what is currently acceptable.

So how can we fight back? One suggestion is to use the mute button on our TV remote control. You wonder why it is there? It was designed by some anti-consumerist angels - so that you could mute the adverts. Use it.

Another suggestion -- come to Church (okay so I would say that.) God really can help free you from the Consumerist Empire.

Merry Christ-mas,

Revd Peter