

A LINE ON LIFE

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Let the Buyer Beware ¹

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With consumer goods, many of us in the United States live the good life. Not only can we get quality items, but also we have a wide variety available at a range of prices. As good as this may seem to the consumer, it can also lead to problems. Especially when choosing larger items, we have to do a great deal of research to find the best buy for our money. If we fail to do the research, we are likely to wind up with an inferior product at an inflated price.

Many business people understand that providing quality goods at reasonable prices is the most profitable long-term method of dealing with customers. However, sometimes we come across people who are more concerned with making the "*fast-buck*." For example, salespeople are often told to make more popular products seem less attractive. In this way, they can steer customers toward slower-moving products or those that provide a higher margin of profit.

Psychologist Paul Wachtel² indicates how much our lifestyle has changed. What seemed lavish several decades ago is viewed as average now. Remember in 1958, when a second car in the family was considered a luxury? Now two-car families are typical. Other upper-class products – air conditioners, televisions, VCRs, microwave ovens and computers – are now seen as essentials. To meet this demand, dual income families have become a norm. According to Wachtel –

"In America, we keep upping the ante. Our expectations keep accommodating to what we have obtained. Wanting more remains constant, regardless of what we have."

To add to this, advertisers try to entice us to buy frivolous products that we don't really need – and we usually can't afford. In addition, those with lower education watch television more. Because of these two factors, these people are more susceptible to being exploited by advertisers.

Barry Schwartz³, a Swarthmore College psychology professor, emphasizes the need for change in the system rather than concentrating on helping individual customers. For example, the retail industry typically provides salespeople with a low base salary and gives them commission or bonuses for sales. To increase their earnings, they have to increase sales. This system rewards hustling for the sale – pressuring the customer to buy. The system does not reward honesty and courtesy – especially when the customer is hesitant to buy.



When we investigate both the product and the business to get the best buy, this effort can take time away from pleasurable activities with family and friends. With the growing number of choices and the complexity of information needed, we spend more of our free time researching items that we want to buy. Schwartz discusses an example of a woman, who earns about \$50,000 a year and wants to buy a stereo.

"Suppose she spends two full days consulting audio consumer magazines and a third day comparison shopping. By the time she gets her stereo, she will have spent \$600 worth of her free time on the purchase.... But if she's doing this in her spare time, then she can't be doing other things. She can't be reading, listening to music, socializing with friends, playing tennis, performing public service and so on."

If shopping for the best product for your money seems like drudgery, you can make a game of it. However, it helps if you can play the game well. First, try to **plan ahead**. If you wait until you absolutely need to buy, you are at the mercy of the seller. For example, if your air conditioner is dying, start to shop around. (Don't wait until it quits working completely!) In contrast to what you may want, you know what you *need*. From a variety of sources, find out what is available to meet your needs. (Sources can vary from trustworthy and knowledgeable friends to magazines like *Consumer Reports*.) Find out what it will cost you – including taxes and installation. Get your estimate *in writing*, indicating how long that estimate will apply. Don't get sucked in by "*how much you will save*" with a percentage discount. What counts is what it actually costs you. In calculating these costs, also get estimates about how much it will cost you to run the air conditioner and how reliable that particular make is. Boil your choices down to a few good brands, then make your purchase. If you are satisfied with the product at its price, you have won. If not learn from this purchase, so you can do better next time.

People — and the times we spend with them — are more important than things.

However, both Wachtel and Schwartz believe we may be too involved in an endless cycle of accumulating *things*. Rather than seeking things to temporarily reduce feelings of boredom or loneliness that we might have, we need to realize that "*time is more precious than goods*." Rather than shopping to feel good, we can use our time better to maintain and improve the relationships with those who mean so much to us.

2 *The Poverty of Affluence: A Psychological Portrait of the American Way of Life*, New Society Publications, 1989.

3 *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Thing in Life*, Norton Publishers, 1994.