

Earth Day shopping doesn't have to be an oxymoron

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The arrival of Earth Day next week, combined with the drop in retail sales numbers, seems like a good time to ask whether the age of rampant consumerism is over or whether it has just stalled.

Earth Day seems like an anti-buying-stuff kind of time, but retailers are working to make it the time to get consumers to switch over to green products. And there are plenty of green products on the market.

So with sales down across the nation, will consumers embrace the message and start buying green? It's hard to tell. So far this year, it seems that consumers can only afford to buy food and gas.

The rampant consumerism blog, www.rampantconsumerism.blogspot.com, has not had a posting since November, about the same time retail sales began a free fall. Coincidence?

Last week, the International Council of Shopping Centers reported the weakest sales for the month of March since 1995. The ICSC tracks 80 retailers and takes into account sales at stores open at least a year, as well as total sales.

Gap Inc. saw same-store sales plummet 18 percent this year, while sales increased 6 percent in the same month last year.

Department stores Kohl's and J.C. Penney also were hard hit, reporting double-digit drops in sales at stores open at least a year.

Even Wal-Mart and Target, where shoppers can buy food and health and beauty aids, were struggling. Sales at Wal-Mart rose 0.7 percent, compared with a 4 percent increase last year. Target saw same-store sales decline 4.4 percent during March, compared with a 12 percent rise a year ago.

While retailers blame the weather and the economy for slow sales, it might be wise to ask whether the thinking has shifted about buying.

It's true that by and large consumers have less discretionary income, but there may be some weariness in consuming goods for the sake of it.

But for those who figure concern for the planet in their shopping decision, there are some retailers that are trying to get customers by "going green."

Sur La Table, with a new store in downtown Sarasota, has a whole host of environmentally friendly products. From the low-tech micro fiber slippers that allow you to clean your floors while walking around the house to the high-tech sanitizing system that allows you to kill bacteria on food and countertops, Sur La Table is talking up its green products.

Perhaps the most astounding is a new chemical-free sanitizing system. The Lotus Sanitizing System infuses water with extra oxygen to create a sanitizing agent.

The company claims the water can "neutralize 99.9 percent of bacteria and pesticides on food and household surfaces, plus remove stains, mold and mildew and deodorize countertops and floors."

I tried the system and was surprised to find that the water does cut through grease and does a really good job of cleaning, better than some cleaning products I have used.

The sanitizing machine is \$169.95 at Sur La Table and comes with a bowl, in which consumers can sanitize fruits, vegetables and even meats, a spray bottle attachment, two microfiber cleaning cloths and the cartridge that infuses the water.

Once you own it, you might never have to buy cleaning products again. Of course, you do have to buy replacement cartridges.

So it certainly will not end shopping, but it might make some consumers feel good about what they buy.

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