



The problem with cheap

I'm trying to cut back on disposable items. You know what I mean, the single use, "I bought it because it was cheap" items. I stood in Target with my sons the other day considering a Father's day picture frame from the dollar section. It was definitely in the boy's price range, and it looked good from a distance. But on closer inspection, the edges weren't smooth and all of the frames looked a little beaten up. I said "Let's get him something that will last, that he will be proud of --when it sits on his desk."

Temptations are always lurking and that was a near miss. Sometimes the allure is a super-great sale price. Other times it's a new, current, cutting edge trend that beckons.

The problem is that cheap stuff breaks. Trendy stuff is just a fleeting fancy. When the style is over, it's over and then you feel the pressure to get rid of it, rationalizing that it didn't cost that much in the first place.

Think of all of the disposable stuff that we buy without thinking: Happy Meals (bought for the toys), party favors from birthday bags that are really just full of inexpensive junk that will break within days, trinkets from our travels or a cheap pair or flip flops that ended up hurting our feet whenever we wear them.

There's an even bigger problem. Simplicity sites label it "planned obsolescence." This is the phenomenon where manufacturer's "deliberately design products of inferior quality."¹

We fell victim to this in the purchase of our first "new" vacuum. We went to a well-known department store that specializes in appliances. After eighteen months of owning the vacuum, I had to take it in for service. I took it to the local fix-it shop instead of the department store where we had purchased it. The repairman asked how long I'd owned it. I said "eighteen months." He smiled and said "A lot of customers who own that vacuum come in with this problem at eighteen months. You'll probably be back at the two year mark for the next repair." The shocking thing was that he was right. I had two friends who bought their vacuums at about the same time and they each had the same experience. This is so maddening because this was not their cheapest machine.

If manufacturers intentionally use cheap parts, appliances break long before they should. If they make things intentionally trendy, they'll quickly become out-of-date. This just increases waste and fills our landfills.

¹ *Is planned obsolescence socially responsible?* Sharon Beder

I read an article in our local paper .² It said that 70-80% of the toys sold in the US come from China. And...sixty percent of all products recalled in 2006 were made there. We have to demand better. Let's vote with our feet. If we can't find a well-made product at one store, lets keep walking until we find a better choice. Things won't change unless consumers expect more.

I pledge to be more deliberate about the things I buy. I'll give each item some thought before I throw it in the cart. I want to purchase consciously and splurge consciously. No more shopping on auto-pilot. Will you join me?

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² Minneapolis Star Tribune. June 19, 2007