

# How Much Stuff is Enough?

## Why We Buy Things We Don't Need

Bob Putman

Ever read a book that made you mad? I was intrigued by the title of Pamela N. Danziger's *Why People Buy Things They Don't Need*. But after browsing through pages 1-96, I found myself grouching. Why? Because Danziger knows precisely what she's talking about, and her job is to sell marketers the goods on you and me.

If you don't like being manipulated any more than I do, you might want to look at what Danziger says about Madison Avenue's clever ploys. These people study your weaknesses, then use them to raid your earnings.

Danziger spent the past 20 years researching why Americans spend as we do. We purchase kitchen gadgets, home textiles, computer software, candles and aromatherapy products, gardening items and a host of other discretionary products. In fact, we fork out about 30 percent of our income for stuff we don't need. Why this madness?

According to Danziger, 14 "justifiers" underlie our motivation to spend money on unnecessary items. "When marketers do the hard work of providing the justifiers for their customers, it is amazing how this bolsters product sales. Justifiers overcome objections and compel the consumer to buy," she writes.

How do we justify spending hard-earned cash on unneeded purchases? On the basis of one or more of the following "reasons."

- Quality of life – The product will improve our education/knowledge, health, spiritual life, emotional satisfaction/security, social success.
- Pleasure – The experience of shopping in an exclusive place makes us feel better.
- Beautify the home – We get a feeling of identity and worth from our home's appearance.
- Education – The more education we have, the more we crave. And then we apply it in the excitement of researching our major purchases.
- Relaxation – The longer we stay in a store, the more we spend, especially on relaxation products.
- Entertainment – We buy or rent things to reduce boredom and generate excitement. Or we seek an environment that helps us experience shopping as entertainment.
- Planned purchase – We build anticipation for buying something unneeded by researching and planning for the purchase.
- Emotional satisfaction – We spend seeking emotional comfort, the fun of having the latest and greatest, or to express our identity.
- Replacing an existing item – Replacing a worn-out item often serves as a catalyst for an extended spending spree on coordinated items.

- Stress relief – We turn to relaxation products/ equipment, nostalgia- and tradition-themed items to deliver comfort.
- Hobbies – We collect for the joy of ownership and the thrill of the hunt. If one family member collects, usually others do also.
- Gifts – When buying gifts for others, we often buy a more expensive one for ourselves.
- Impulse purchase – We gain a feeling of power and entitlement from making an impulse buy.
- Status – While few of us admit it, we buy things that will be visible to others in order to impress them.

Do any of these justifiers sound familiar? They should. Advertisers spend billions each year to push these buttons in your psyche. For the most part these reasons to spend are simply nonsense. Danziger states: "The justifiers give consumers the illusion they are acting rationally in purchasing, but in reality, they remain driven by personal desires and emotions. ... When marketers really understand how their products play into the hearts and emotions of their customers, the judicious use of justifiers in marketing communications stacks the deck in the marketer's favor and gives consumers permission to buy."<sup>1</sup> In other words, they pull your emotional and psychological strings and a-spending you go.

Armed with these clues to how marketers snag you, how do you declare war against Madison Avenue manipulation?

A few suggestions:

- Whenever you see an advertisement on TV, talk back to it or mute the sound. Point out the commercial's hidden lie to your children, spouse or friends.
- Do a word study on "content" and "contentment" in the Bible. You might want to begin with 1 Timothy 6: 6-8 and Philippians 4:11-13.
- If you're wired for impulse buying ("see it; like it; buy it"), pray while you shop. And exercise the most non-commercial spiritual fruit, self-control.
- Meditate on your motivations. What do you get out of shopping and spending? Does it improve your mood, strengthen your confidence, energize your emotions? Should it?
- For long-lasting satisfaction, invest your extra money in helping people and extending Christ's kingdom. See Luke 16:9.

You don't have to be a victim of your own indulgence or Madison Avenue's manipulation. You were chosen for a better life. So shop wisely, shop well and shop only when necessary. Diligently search for your satisfaction in God alone. There's plenty there for the savvy shopper (Isa. 55:1-3).

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*Bob Putman is editor of BGC•WORLD. Reprinted by permission of BGC•WORLD.*

<sup>1</sup>Why People Buy Things They Don't Need, by Pamela N. Danziger, © 2004 (Paramount Marketing Publishers), pp. 59-60.