

Taking Action!

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Every time a person makes decisions about how and where to spend money, s/he is exercising his/her power as a consumer. There are several ways that teens can speak out against consumerism, raise awareness about consumerist media messages, and make a difference in the way companies operate.

Boycott Power

A boycott is the decision to abstain from buying or dealing with a particular organization as a form of protest and/or means of coercion. Teens may think that if they boycott a particular product or company, their actions will make no difference because individually, each teen is



of little importance to big corporations. However, there is power in numbers and the more people who boycott, the heavier the influence on the organization being boycotted. Boycotting gives teens a way to protest and state their beliefs. If they boycott something, others may become interested and take up the cause.

Complaint Power

Complaint power is another way in which consumers can influence companies to change their practices. This method involves talking to a company directly, either by phone, e-mail, or letter. Shari Graydon suggests that writing a letter is the best method of contacting a company because it is harder to throw away or ignore than an e-mail or phone message. A letter also takes more time than an email or phone call, indicating that the writer is serious about the message (Graydon 87). Again, there is always power in numbers, so the more letters a company receives; the more serious it will take the complaint. Companies realize that for every person who phones, emails, or writes a letter, there are at least hundreds more who share the same sentiments (Graydon 91).

Ways to make companies listen (adapted

from Graydon):

- Tell the company that you use and enjoy its product(s) or service(s). This will make your opinion stand out more because you are a valued customer.
- Let the company know that you feel that its business practices, ethics, advertisements, etc. are problematic. If you clearly and politely state your opinion, the company is more likely to pay attention to your comments.
- State that you will boycott the company's product(s) or service(s) as long as they continue with the actions that you disagree with. This shows the company that its actions are affecting business.
- Indicate that you will encourage others to follow your lead in boycotting the product(s) or service(s).



Tell the company that you would like a written response to your concerns.

Request information about how it intends to address your concerns. It will be more difficult for the company to ignore your opinions, and those in charge will be more likely to come up with a solution to the problem.

You may want to give your age when making a complaint. Many companies value their teen markets, and your age may draw some attention to the complaint.

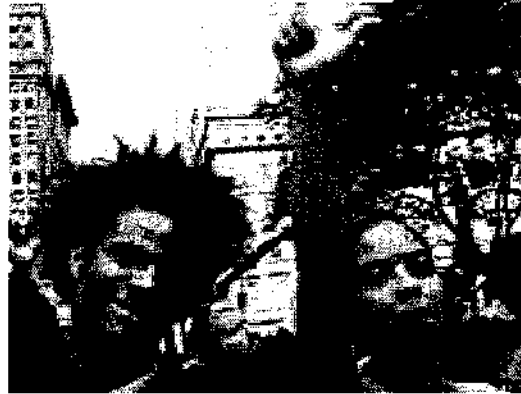
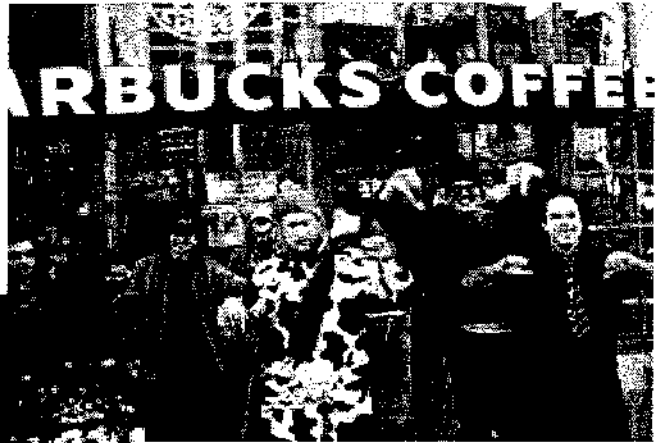
If you are dealing with an advertisement, you should send your complaints to both the company and the media "host," for example, the TV station or newspaper that ran the ad. It may also be a good idea to send complaints to the organization in your country that monitors advertising.

Ethical Consumerism

Teens can make the choice to buy from and support companies that show a commitment and adherence to certain ethical standards. For example, teens may choose not to buy from companies that produce clothes by employing

children in sweatshops. Others may choose to buy only fair-trade coffee. The British-based organization Ethical Consumer outlines the various ways that individuals can buy ethically. Teens can practice ethical consumerism through positive buying, favouring ethical products, or they

can use negative purchasing, which entails refusing to buy unethical products (Ethical Consumer). Teens can research companies and issues on the web, and also learn to ask the appropriate questions when making purchases.



Useful Canadian Webpages:

Oxfam Canada

<<http://www.oxfam.ca/>>

The Oxfam Canada webpage, under "Campaigns" provides information about various issues in ethical consumerism and initiatives to make change. Oxfam campaigns strive to get people involved in educating, petitioning, and raising awareness of issues, such as sweatshop labour and fair trade.

Street Cents

<<http://www.cbc.ca/streetcents/>>

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Street Cents is an award-winning television program for youth about consumerism, marketing, and popular culture. The television show and its website give teens the opportunity to voice their opinions about various products and companies, while also educating their audience about various products and encouraging critical thinking about what they see in the media.

Culture Jamming

Culture jamming is “the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages” (Klein 280). The parodies often send counter-messages using the company’s own methods of communication. This attaches a different meaning to the same medium that the company has put much time and money into creating, thus subverting it. An increasing number of activists are rejecting the messages of consumerism that are found everywhere in our public space through culture jamming (Klein 282).

Adbusters, otherwise known as Culture Jammers Headquarters, organizes many culture jamming campaigns. Some of the more recognizable Adbusters campaigns are Buy Nothing Day, Antipreneur, and TV Turnoff.

Buy Nothing Day

Buy Nothing Day (BND) was created by the Adbusters Media Foundation in the early 1990s to encourage reflection on, and

awareness of, consumer practices. Buy Nothing Day is part of the larger culture-jamming movement which aims to reduce consumption, make people aware of the advertisements and media messages that we are bombarded with on a daily basis, and increase awareness about how consumer behaviour is deeply ingrained in us. Originating in Vancouver, Buy Nothing Day is now practiced world-wide on November 28th, coinciding with American Thanksgiving, a huge shopping day in the U.S. when hordes of consumers crowd into stores looking for bargains (Edelman 64).

The BND website suggests various activities to do on Buy Nothing Day including taking out print ads and organizing TV spots to advertise the day, setting up a Credit Card Cut-Up Booth outside a major retail area, and walking up and down the aisles of Walmart with an empty cart. The website also has free downloads for posters, t-shirts, stickers, and web-banners to promote BND.

Buy Nothing Christmas takes BND into December, by encouraging people to spend

more time with each other while spending less money. The website offers printable Gift-Exemption vouchers to help with the awkwardness that Buy Nothing Christmas may create.

Antipreneur

The idea behind Adbusters' Antipreneur campaign is that activists can fight corporations with what they fear most, competition. The first initiative of this campaign has been the Blackspot sneaker, which is "the world's first global anti-brand". The shoe is made from organic hemp

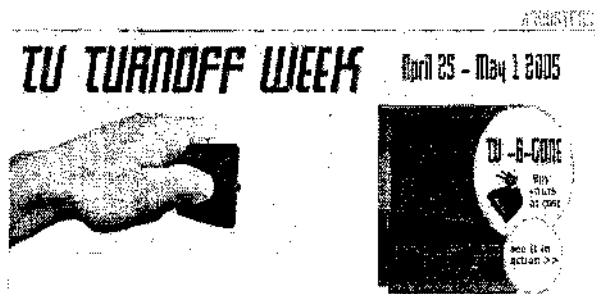
produced in a Portuguese union shop and has a 100% recycled tire sole. The Blackspot Sneaker campaign aims to offer an alternative that "promotes ethics over profit, values over image, idealism over hype."

Adbusters hopes to spread the Blackspot campaign to other industries such as music, restaurants, and other clothing.



TV Turnoff

TV Turnoff runs during the last week of April. According to the Adbusters website, it is about “cleaning up the mental environment” and taking a stand against the “distorted news, manipulative ads, violence and top-down culture” found on television.



DIY

The DIY or Do-It-Yourself movement can be practiced by teens as a rejection of consumerism. DIY promotes the idea of making things for oneself instead of purchasing them. It can refer to making and producing one’s own music without mainstream success, and “is located somewhere between teen political activism and the surly pubescent hardcore music fandom of yore” (Quart 208). Teens who

have embraced the DIY music scene put on their own shows, make their own fliers, and play shows at their houses or in non-commercial buildings of their youth communities.

DIY can also refer to making one’s own clothes. Stitch ‘N’ Bitch is a recent movement which has brought knitting back into popularity among women of all ages. Teenagers have embraced this knitting movement as a way to create funky, one-of-a-kind clothes while visiting and spending time with other knitters. The Stitch ‘N’ Bitch books, written by Debbie Stoller, give information on knitting and encourage people to form their own groups.

Libraries can accommodate teen interests in DIY activities by having strong collections of craft and DIY books, in addition to providing teen programming that caters to the DIY interests of their YA population.

Works Cited

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- Quart, Alissa. *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*. Cambridge, Mass: Perseus Publication, 2003.
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Some DIY Resources

ReadyMade Magazine <<http://www.readymademag.com>>

This is a monthly magazine with a variety of ideas for people who like to make things. While some ideas such as home-decorating may not be of primary interest to teens, the magazine provides a wide array of ideas of teen interest with accompanying instructions, from making your own jewellery to planting a tree!

Stoller, Debbie L. *Stitch 'N' Bitch: the knitters handbook*. New York : Workman, 2003.

Stoller, Debbie L. *Stitch 'N' Bitch Nation*. New York: Workman, 2004.

The *Stitch 'N' Bitch* books are a great way to acquaint teens with the world of knitting. The books cover every basic step of knitting, at the same time providing a comprehensive picture of the knitting lifestyle. Fun facts about knitting are

interspersed throughout the book. The text informs the reader why s/he should knit, and provides instructions on how to set up your own *Stitch 'N' Bitch* group. The books provide fun and hip patterns that appeal to teens. Photographs give teens an idea of the variety of clothing and accessories they can make with a set of knitting needles and some yarn. Very fun!

