

Redefining Consumption in a New Era of Responsibility

By Sam Porter

A June 21 front-page *Register-Guard* story on the recession's impact on consumer attitudes suggests "there may be no return" to "the 'supersize me' mentality that more and bigger must be better." The article cites several experts on Oregon's economy who support the idea that we may be moving toward a society that consumes less.

Yet, a society with a consumer-based economy in an era of economic and ecological limits confronts us with difficult choices.

Oregon State University History Professor William Robbins shows part of what is at stake in resolving the dilemma between the need to earn a living and the equally important need to preserve the land to which Oregonians share a deep connection and sense of importance.

In *Landscapes of Promise* (1997), he observes, "economic, environmental and ecological changes taking place elsewhere were delayed in the Pacific Northwest." Until very recently, the region was simply beyond the reach of the expanding market of capitalism. "Indeed, what is striking about the region is the *very* recent and *very* rapid pace of human-induced environmental disturbance over *very* extensive areas in a *very* brief span of time."

So how do Oregonians see themselves as responsible citizens and consumers in relation to the economy and the land that is Oregon?

In four statewide scientific surveys of more than 1600 Oregonians conducted between April 2008 and April 2009, PolicyInteractive, a non-profit research organization

located in Eugene, found astonishingly high levels – 74-87% – of overall agreement with the statement “*our country would be a better place if we all consumed less.*”

To better understand what “consume less” and related themes mean to Oregonians, we subsequently conducted 63 in-depth interviews. These interviews provide deeper understandings than possible in short telephone interviews.

First, we recruited 33 respondents from a statewide random sample survey who, although they agree we’d be a better society “if we all consumed less,” said they are “unconcerned” when asked, “Are you unconcerned or concerned about climate change?” They also view environmentalists as extremists. We wanted, in short, to examine the views of Oregonians who are not bleeding-heart environmentalists.

And second, we selected 30 Eugene-Springfield area “influentials” defined as people who speak to at least 200 citizens annually on public policy issues. They come from the fields of business, politics, education, and religion, and their political views represent a balance across the political spectrum.

We asked both groups for examples of what “consume less” means to them. The “unconcerned” said things like: consuming less fuel and energy; driving less; producing less waste, garbage and junk; avoiding excess material consumption, buying non-essentials, overeating, junk food, and obesity; and “we’re spoiled compared to the rest of the world.”

Similarly, influentials said things such as avoiding excessive acquisition of material goods and consumption of fuel and energy; making transportation more efficient; avoiding excess packaging; buying local and in bulk; and purchasing moderately sized houses. One influential said, “The inefficiency and imbalance of our

levels of consumption and waste compared with other nations is out of proportion.”

Another said, “energy is key and I admit to being a heavy user of it.”

Former Eugene Mayor (1997-2005) Jim Torrey said, “We use too much oil. I also believe it’s important we apply the command-respect as opposed to the demand-respect approach to how you deal with that. But I think over-consumption of oil is a problem. People have become acclimated to having things done too easy. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to take advantage of the improvements in health, for example.”

Current Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy said, “Many have more than they need to meet their basic needs and we could all benefit from sharing more broadly and consuming less individually. We’re a country built on the assumption of endless supplies of everything and it’s important to recognize that isn’t true. That recognition is crucial in terms of water, fuel, housing, products, and other things we think we need.”

When asked how they see “*our country being a better place if we all consumed less,*” the “unconcerned” said things such as spending more time with family; our society would make less of an impact on the natural environment; a fairer distribution of natural resources; and being less dependent on foreign oil. One said, “Happier not to feel like we have to ‘keep up with the Jones.’” Another, “Life would be simpler, less junk and more focus on important things like family.”

What is telling about the responses of both groups is their emphasis on the practical, common sense and frugality as well as on the importance of relationships.

When pressed about their own practices, 87% of the “unconcerned” and 70% of the influentials answered “Yes” when asked, “*... do you think of yourself as also able to consume less in ways that would benefit our country?*”

But one of the influentials answered neither yes nor no saying, “I have a hard time breaking away from long, entrenched habits or ways of doing things. I can – and do at times – bike to work instead of drive but could do better if I had a better bike path on which to ride. I would jump to it if government and industry provided good options to allow me to be a better consumer and still achieve some of my basic needs.”

For those able to consume less we asked, “*What comes to mind in terms of possible actions or decisions on your part?*” The “unconcerned” said things such as driving, eating and buying less; walking; awareness; prioritizing needs; avoiding packaging and buying in bulk; raising one’s own food and self-reliance. Influentials stressed home energy- electricity- and water-efficiency as well as transportation, food, recycling, self-restraint, and mindfulness.

When asked “*Do you think our country’s economic well being would be hurt if we all consumed less?*” 69% of the “unconcerned” said “No.” Of the influentials, 50% said “No” and 33% said “Yes.” But 13% resisted yes-or-no answers saying consuming less might hurt the economy in the short-term but not in the long run.

One of the influentials said, “Part of problem is you’ve got a certain structure based on consumption you’ve got to live within. So the answer has to be yes. Would I like a different framework? Yeah. How does that happen? Some of this is leadership.”

To address such tensions we asked influentials: “*Considering the current economic downturn, which of the following two statements comes closest to your view, even if neither represents your view exactly: (A) Our declining economy means leaders must do everything they can to stimulate growth and development; or, (B) An economic*

downturn may be just what we need to reorder our values?” Seventy-three percent chose “reorder our values,” 13% chose “stimulate growth” and 13% refused to choose.

One who works in the business community chose (A) saying, “It’s hard not be tempered by the mission of the organization in which I work.”

When asked for their level of agreement with this statement, *“Because of our current economic downturn, our leaders should do everything necessary to stimulate growth and economic development,”* 66% of the “unconcerned” agreed overall. But when asked for their level of agreement with this statement, *“This economic downturn we’re in now may be just what we need to reorder our values,”* 75% of the “unconcerned” agreed overall.

So in both groups there is a high percentage – 73-75% – that agree the economic downturn may prompt a reordering of values.

PolicyInteractive’s findings strongly suggest Oregonians we should significantly reduce our material level of consumption.

Our research indicates that while Oregonians surely want economic security they appear to be choosing – as more meaningful – a life with less material consumption. They want a way of life less wasteful and more energy-efficient – and to move away from a consumption orientation – not only for economic reasons but also, and perhaps even more important, for the sake of responsible relationships to each other and to the land that is Oregon – relationships that appear central to our identity as Oregonians.

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