

Cutting back

By Ruth Ostrow

As consumers in Australia were deciding not to overspend this festive season, spooked by rising petrol prices, nervous about falling real estate prices and workplace reforms, some consumers abroad were curbing spending on philosophical grounds.

According to a recent story in The Observer Magazine, in London and Europe there has emerged a growing tribe of young, educated, well-heeled and opinionated people determined to sidestep the consumerist perils of modern life and put the kibosh on overspending and hedonism.

"New puritans" is what the Future Foundation, a British consumer trends forecasting consultancy, calls the change in attitudes. "Something very interesting, indeed radical, is happening," says Jim Murphy, Future Foundation's associate director.

Gone is the guilt-free gadabout, to be replaced by the model citizen who thinks through the consequences of excessive behaviour and chooses to curb it. "New minimalists" is another term describing those consciously electing to do without.

According to The Observer, new puritans denounce gas-guzzling, pollution-making cars and other forms of antisocial materialism. They do not binge drink, smoke, buy big brands, eat junk food, have multiple sexual partners, waste money on designer clothes, grow beyond their optimum weight, subscribe to celebrity magazines, drive a flash car or live to watch television.

In the United States a similar, if less moralistic, movement is afoot called voluntary simplicity, where consumers are electing to keep the old TV, recycle goods, move out of big cities and grow their own vegies as a backlash against corporations that have reaped vast profits while ignoring environmental and health costs.

Meanwhile, here, downshifting is all the rage. The Australia Institute estimates that one-quarter of our population will have scaled down in the next decade - tired of keeping up with the Joneses and in search of being time-rich rather than asset-rich.

Whether it's coming from puritanism or just common sense, there's a definite network of global movements seeking to quell the sea of consumerism before it swamps the world. And while I personally remain partial to the pleasures of the flesh, I do applaud all efforts by younger generations to find a way of nipping materialism in the bud. As a downshifter, I can only repeat the mantra that has immeasurably improved the quality of my life: sometimes less is more.

www.ruthostrow.com

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