

Why the American Consumer
Will Keep On Buying No Matter What

Shoptimism

Lee Eisenberg

Author of the New York Times bestseller
THE NUMBER



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Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep on Buying No Matter What Lee Eisenberg
Bestselling author Lee Eisenberg searches for a Universal Buy Theory that explains why we behave in rational and irrational ways when we shop.

Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep on Buying No Matter What Details

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From Reader Review Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep on Buying No Matter What for online ebook

Blog on Books says

If the economy is indeed making its way back up hill, it may have something to do with what author Lee Eisenberg describes as “Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep on Buying No Matter What” (Free Press). Shoptimism is the belief that through times thick and thin, the American consumer is programmed to keep on shopping. But, of course, the question is, why? What are the factors that induce us to buy; to buy things we don’t always need; to buy just to buy. What are the marketing messages that trigger a purchase? How does pricing effect our decisions (why for example, do we always think that something priced at \$19.99 represents a bargain, while an item for \$20 – just one penny more – represents “quality.”) Eisenberg, who has written for publications ranging from Esquire to the Daily Beast (and perhaps, in this case, more importantly worked for Land’s End!) explores the issue of shopping from both sides of the table – the marketers and the consumers. What he arrives at are a series of revelations that run the gamut from advertising (camouflaged advertising vs the subliminal “s.e.x. in the ice cubes” that melted away a long time ago) to the emotions behind consumerism (classic buyers vs. romantic buyers) leaving us with a bare-knuckled view of what really works in today’s market.

Allison says

I've had this on my bookshelf for a long time and finally decided I needed to read it before it became too outdated! Having read similar consumer behavior type books, this didn't provide me with much new information.

What I did like was approaching the topic from the perspective of someone who simply had an interest in the sell-side & buy-side, and not because consumer behavior was their career.

Elle says

Shoptimism is a fun and informative book about shopping, but it is also a social history of America's past several decades. The book explores how shopping-related phenomena influence our present and have shaped our past.

Shoptimism is full of information and wide-ranging references that entertain, challenge, and inform. The cleverness of the writing, with plays on the jargon of the topics and argot of the subjects, and the conversational tone keep the reading from being heavy even though some of the topics are weighty.

The book treats a trendy topic with academic thoroughness without forfeiting the fun of trendiness. If I were a marketing or communications teacher, I would recommend it to my students.

Bobbie says

Shoptimism was a book touted on NPR and by my boyfriend, how could I turn it down? After a decent wait it arrived, and the boyfriend dispensed with it in a week. This, then, was going to be a good time: if it isn't extremely well written and diverting, then the boyfriend cannot be bothered.

Lee has worked at Land's End and Esquire, lives in Chicago, and has a well-funded wife and two children. Lee's life and mine are about as diametrically opposite as you can make it, except that we are both fiscally conservative and we seem to enjoy watching how people behave (and why they behave that way). Shoptimism looks at the quasi-American (I say quasi, because there are more cultures than ours that enjoy indulgence in expenditure, see Japan) tendency to purchase and the very very thin line, at least in this vocabulary, between "want" and "need". He relegates people into two groups such as 'Buy Scolds' ("don't buy that! it's spending money! research it for 60 days first and purchase only then on a full stomach!) and the opposite, those who would want you to buy ("Buy this! It's shiny and cutting edge!). I am a horrific Buy Scold with some splurchase tendencies (another wonderful phrase from the book: a "splurchase" is a purchase made in splurge to either self-congratulate or self-medicate). Having read "The Millionaire Next Door" and "The Millionaire Woman Next Door" and "Rich Dad, Poor Dad" etc., this only affirms that you need to have a very good grip on "want" vs "need").

I loaned it to my Dad... and now I really want to read "Freakonomics".

Speeda says

My strongest impression is that the author was obsessed with swift and clever language and tone in a manner I found cloying. It felt like an attempt to distract me from realizing that the broad approach to analyzing "why people buy" evaded clear conclusions. Like Costco shoppers on a Sunday morning, it sampled and dabbled everywhere, meandering without purpose (exactly the type of annoying sentence you'd see in this book). Or: it felt like shopping at Urban Outfitters in book form -- sometimes one stumbles upon an interesting flash of something, but it is mostly full of references for the sake of using references, self-obsessed, and not particularly deep or satisfying.

Tammy says

I almost closed Shoptimism after the first few chapters, but I'm glad I stuck with it. This is a pretty generic book on how people shop, looking at various marketing attempts and classifying buyers into different groups. If you want to skip reading the book, you can basically take away the ideas that:

- 1) We don't really know why people buy.
- 2) There are many different types of shoppers.

I, however, am completely new to the idea of marketing research, and this broad overview of types of buyers intrigued me. I liked trying to figure out what kind of buyer I am (more of a "romantic" buyer) and it also helped me understand the mindset other "buyers" that I know. I'm also helping out at a family member's

independently-owned jewelry store, and found it pretty interesting to think about the different types of buyers that walked into the shop.

Will I read many more books on consumerism? Probably not (unless someone has a really great recommendation. Comment below!) -- this book seems to suggest that we don't know much of anything, so, in light of that, why read another book about it?

I am, however, going to learn more about the idea of "cultural capital", which was mentioned briefly in the book and grabbed me. Once again, reading one book leads to many more.

Happy shopping, everyone!

Mark Mikula says

I've had a run of books in between a three- and a four-star rating. It seemed to confirm my expectations more than it surprised me, so I'd put it somewhere in the 3.50 or 3.75 star rating range. The author has a unique story to tell from the standpoint of his embedded status as a former executive at Land's End. I appreciated his insight into Sears's takeover of that label.

Eisenberg told solid stories and brought a wide range of historians, philosophers, and contemporary experts and everyday shoppers into the story. It divided its coverage between the sell-side and the buy-side. I found the commentary on the advertising industry, on myths about shopping, and the coverage of retail history to be the most compelling parts of the book. It referenced *Consumed* and *No Logo*, both of which I intend to read at some point. If you want some insight into how you can break some of your shopping habits and an awareness of some of the tactics used by the sell-side to convince you that you need a certain something, you can glean that from *Shoptimism*.

C says

I wanted to like this book - really, I did. Instead I found myself quickly putting it down after slogging through the first 200 pages. Just another business book with no meat!

Lee Eisenberg attempts to answer the question of "Why do we shop and buy what we do?" by looking at "The Sell Side" and "The Buy Side." The book takes a circuitous route into each mindset, exposing the consumer marketing machine in a jumble of observations and reflections on his time behind the scenes as Executive VP at Lands' End.

After reading *Spent* (which I HIGHLY recommend), I found myself hard-pressed to endure this slop. Don't waste your time on this one.

Gloria says

...Nothing astounding in terms of revelations for me, but overall enjoyable.

The writing style, which if I weren't in a hurry to finish the book, probably is pleasant and something others would like: chatty, personal, engaging. Some of his stories got in the way of what I was after (which is?), and I did get a tad annoyed that his family's spending ability was clearly above mine, and he didn't seem to recognize that perhaps some of his readers might be in the same position as me.

That said, what I did like about the book is the fact that it was a great way to find some good academic sources to read, and some pithy summaries of major consumption theories. His writing was reasonably well footnoted for a popular read, and extremely clear. For this, I think the book has some good bite-size readings for a future class on persuasion.

Oh, I and loved the epigram "Once you label me, you negate me." —Soren Kierkegaard

My notes below, are really for me, FYI.

Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping p 28

Underhill on data to action; Age of Cheap p 70, 72

Experian's demographic buckets, p 81

Oglivy's VALs system, p 83

paper by Thomas O'Guinn and Albert Muniz "Brand Communities, 2001

Peter Drucker quote on page 88 "retailers [need to:] define themselves by the customers they serve, not by the products [they sell:]."

Deen Skolnick Weisberg, et al. "The Seductive Allure of Neuroscience Explanations" Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience 20, no. 3 (2008) 470-477

possible PDF chapter 8 "You-The New Them"

Michael Landy, performance artist 2001

good summary of Scold lit, p 148

Henry Murray (who pre-dates Maslow) with primary and psychogenic needs, p 155

Bourdieu's *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, 1983: never heard of it!

"cultural capital"—comes from Daniel Miller's *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*

interesting literary critic who looks at consumption: Rachel Bowlby, two books: *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping*, and *Shopping with Freud*

Eisenberg's big attempt at Unified Shopping Theory comes from Walter Pitkin: *The Consumer: His Nature and His Changing Habits* 1930: Romantic versus Classic Buyer

mention of thingness, p 233, as seen through consumption theory (versus, let's say Hegel)

bizarre little survey the BEM Sex Role Inventory Test, p 280

Diderot Effect, of course! "Regrets on Parting with my old dressing Gown"!

Leonard Auslander "Beyond Words" American Historical review 110 no 4, 2005, p 1015-1045

Birgit says

Living the frugal life (yes, my resolution for the New Year, and still going strong) also made me read some books on the subject, and I must say that Lee Eisenberg's approach to the topic was a truly engaging one. Circling the topic from two sides – the Seller's and the Buyer's – the book is chock full with well researched information as well as written in a wonderfully absorbing and fun style. This book provides the reader with a

detailed view on consumerism and while not everyone might agree, I personally really appreciated his not-quite-academical writing style, which was both refreshing and welcome even though this is a non-fiction book.

E.g. the description of how Eisenberg accompanied and observed how his wife hunts for a new little black dress is both hilarious and a great introduction to the book. And while he didn't quite find the "Unified Theory of Buying" he's been searching for, he sure provides the reader with a lot to think about when it comes to our own buying habits.

In short: A highly entertaining and very informative book on the subject of shopping!

Michele says

As far as books on marketing, shopping and the like go, this is one of the better ones. Even if you don't give a hoot about what makes people buy, the book's worth reading if only for the good writing and unending witty observations. On the other hand, if you're a sourpuss who thinks all consumerism is evil all the time, you probably won't enjoy it.

Meg says

Shoptimism is Eisenberg's expansive exploration of why Americans buy things, including comments from advertisers, scientists, data collectors, economists, business owners, polls and surveys, shoppers, friends, family, and anyone else he could hunt down to interview. It may not be the most scientific of books, but it was chock full of interesting information from differing, often competing viewpoints.

Surprisingly, while I thought a bit about what Eisenberg presented, I found that Shoptimism actually made me think more about ideas Eisenberg probably did not intend to introduce as main topics. Socioeconomic class, for example, was something that grabbed me right away. It became apparent extremely early that many of the shoppers of Eisenberg's acquaintance are in a much higher tax bracket than I am. This was difficult to ignore when some of the examples meant to represent an Everyman's or Everywoman's dilemma, such as buying the classic little black dress, involved a price tag higher than my bills each month (excluding rent).

Overall, I appreciated learning about the many ways that consumers are marketed to, and the many things that may affect whether or not they buy. But strangely, it was the lessons within the lessons that I found truly fascinating and which would lead me to recommend this book to anyone. Hidden gems abound, like a gender test (hey, it influences buying!) to see how dominant your feminine and masculine sides are. (You can be dominant on both, on one or the other, or neither. I happen to be undifferentiated or not dominant on either gender according to the test.) Or the factoid that smiling is considered middle class or servile, so that high fashion magazines only show scowling people, but your general JC Penney's catalog will have smiling catalog models... I think anyone who reads the book will find their own interesting tidbits, as well as enjoying the work as a whole.

David says

Overlong discussion of various studies, personal observations, etc. re consumer psychology. There were a few interesting tidbits on marketers' exploitation of anchoring effects in pricing and such, but.....

(a) extremely leisurely pace -- never settles for "some people buy things they don't need because they find it exciting" when he could instead say "i found myself thinking about why anyone would buy something they don't need. Surely we've all been guilty of this.....my wife once bought.....which she didn't need, methinks.....so i called up joe smith, who is a professor of marketing at the university of london, and we met for coffee at starbucks [oh, the irony] on a windy day to discuss....." and eventually get to the conclusion.

(b) the Strunk and White advice "do not affect a breezy manner" was ignored in the writing and editing of this book. Probably the worst part, in my opinion, was the unctuous chapter on sex differences in shopping, in which he refers to men as "Martians" and women as "Venusians" dozens of times.

Kristen Northrup says

Good current overview of consumerism, covering the behavior of both buyers and sellers. Eisenberg's journalism background means snappier writing than the more academic books, with references to 'soothingly pretentious' ad campaigns and stores entombed in marble-tiled malls. A discussion of Victorian Era marketing invokes 'the man in the grey flannel waistcoat.'

No one is villain or victim here, although the 'Buy Scolds' receive regular chiding for overdoing it. The author and his family are unrepentant consumers, which is an unusual position to take in this genre. Eisenberg's basic stance is that as long as nothing is going on the credit cards and you're leaving enough to live on, knock yourself out with the self-actualization. (Within reason. Rolex owners still receive no mercy.) Advertisers are not brainwashers and consumers are neither sheep nor shallow. It's certainly easy -- and unwise -- to spend too much on things that bring no meaning to your life, but there are plenty of ways to do it properly as well. Humans have social needs as well as biological ones.

The inevitable discussions of gender differences in shopping stay refreshingly non-sexist. One reason is provided -- he speaks respectfully and often of both his wife and college-age daughter.

He references many authors I've already read -- always fun; hi again! -- and passes along time-saving criticism of a book about which I was on the fence. I've also added to my to-read list, of course.

This book almost works well for a reading club. There are plenty of discussion provoking tidbits -- Who buys black market baby food? What's the ethical cut-off for counterfeit luxury goods and (much trickier) their knock-offs? Does the Mall of America really only have two Starbucks? How could anyone think a separate plus-size Lands End catalog was a good idea? Why does the % of money spent on clothing not change as income rises? Am I the only one who initially thought a reference to "dual carbs" was related to national eating habits? But it does run long. Even though I enjoyed every chapter, I started to feel like I'd been reading the thing for weeks.

I'd still like to know whether the art at the beginning of each chapter was Charles Burns or a look-alike and why his research-gathering job at Target ended so quickly.1

Marianne Brodman says

"A man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body & his psychic powers, but his clothes & his house, his wife & children, his ancestors & friends, his reputation & works, his lands & yacht & bank account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax & prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle & die away, he feels cast down, not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all." William James, Psychologist, 1890
