Consuming fashions

Sohail Inayatullah on the future of shopping

To buy or not to buy, she thinks. The carpet looks beautiful, but what were the conditions under which it was made? She takes out her mobile phone and uses it to access the Web. At www.greenleafstandards.com, she finds out that the carpet was made in a village co-operative. Profits there are shared and the working conditions, while tough, are safe. A ranking from the world consumer union showed it to be an 80-star product. Good, but not a perfect 100 - as a co-operative, most of the profits still go to the distributor.

"Perhaps, instead of the Belgian ready-made carpet," she thinks. But the ratings on it are even lower. True, labour is not exploited, but chemical dyes are used - 70% of the dyes. The carpet company that figures this out and markets through the Web will have a strong competitive advantage. International non-governmental organisations will jump to promote the ethical product and, slowly and surely, Pakistani carpet exports will expand, tourism will grow and the Pakistani economy and culture benefit. Does this sound too idealistic to her liking? And the money spent wisely might, if not save the world, at least pressure business to make it better?

Such a scenario is not far from becoming real. Two converging trends promise to change the nature and politics of consumerism. The first is a rapid development in computer and telecommunications that both create more information and enable easier access to it. Before too long, consumers may simply electronically scan a product to obtain an environmental or equity rating on it (through a global rating organisation), or use the Web to search for product information. Along with these technological changes, trends in consumer behaviour suggest that not just price, but also social and environmental values will help to determine the success of many a product's future. While there will always be companies trying to "greenswash" consumers, using their hopes for a better world to pull a quick one, the quick, the fluid of information on the Net could help shoppers use their dollars to create the future they want.

More information about products is already available, and is starting to influence production around the world. Already the Pakistani or Indian carpet-maker has to consider the local middle-class-values-oriented shopper as well as Western shoppers with concerns about human rights. Some of these producers are beginning to develop their own websites and start direct global selling. A dramatic evolution of product standards is under way. Once, they were merely concerned about functionality does the product work? Then came issues of price and aesthetics (how good does it look?). Now consumers care not so much about the product itself, but the identity it gives to the buyer - not, "Does the T-shirt keep me warm, or is the fit right, or the price?" But "What does it say on it, how does it represent me as individual?" This is now true of two demographic groups buying. The first are baby boomers with unsettled identities, the second are big-city Third World youth, wanting to be seen as American, as globally hip, instead of locally poor.

But a new phase is starting - products whose success depend on meeting the demands of the rights generation, those who have grown up amid UN declarations and conferences - the emerging global civil society. Their concerns include the environment, and the rights of women, children and labour. Now, therefore, not only does a product have to be effective, look good and have a competitive price, it also must be made in conditions in which child workers are not exploited, the environment not ruined and the corporation not discriminated in its employment practices. The Danish carpet company that figures this out and markets through the Web will have a strong competitive advantage. International non-governmental organisations will jump to promote the ethical product and, slowly and surely, Pakistani carpet exports will expand, tourism will grow and the Pakistani economy and culture benefit. Does this sound too idealistic to her liking? And the money spent wisely might, if not save the world, at least pressure business to make it better?

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