

2011

# Toward a Sustainable Marketplace: Expanding Options and Benefits for Consumers

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## Recommended Citation

Luchs, Michael G., Rebecca Walker Naylor and Randall L. Rose (2011), "Toward a Sustainable Marketplace: Expanding Options and Benefits for Consumers," *Journal of Research for Consumers*, 19: 1-12.

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Issue: 19, 2011

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## Toward a Sustainable Marketplace: Expanding Options and Benefits for Consumers

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\* Order of authorship is alphabetical amongst the first three co-authors, who served as co-chairs of the Sustainable Consumption Track of the 3rd Transformative Consumer Research conference held at Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business in the summer of 2011. Order of authorship is alphabetical amongst the remaining contributing authors who were participants of the track.

### ABSTRACT

While popular interest in sustainable consumption continues to grow, there is a persistent gap between consumers' typically positive explicit attitudes towards sustainability and their actual consumption behaviours. This gap can be explained, in part, by the belief that choosing to consume sustainably is both constraining and reduces individual-level benefits. While the belief that sustainable consumption depends on making trade-offs is true in some contexts, increasingly consumers are finding that more sustainable forms of consumption can provide both an expanded set of options and additional, individual-level benefits. In this essay, we discuss and illustrate an expanded set of options and benefits across the consumption cycle: from acquisition to usage and disposition. An underlying theme is the separation of material ownership from the extraction of consumer benefits across the consumption cycle. We believe that this ongoing evolution of products - and even business models - has the potential to simultaneously increase value to consumers as well as speed progress towards a more sustainable marketplace.

### ARTICLE

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#### Introduction

Interest in sustainable consumption continues to grow both within industry and academia, with the latter evidenced by the increasing number of publications, journal special issues,

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and conferences explicitly addressing sustainability and sustainable consumption. Indeed, the most recent Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) conference, sponsored by the Association for Consumer Research and hosted by Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business, brought together scholars from around the world to discuss a variety of topics related to consumer well-being, including a track focused on "Sustainable Consumption." We define sustainable consumption as consumption that simultaneously optimizes the environmental, social, and economic consequences of consumption in order to meet the needs of both current and future generations. We expect that most consumers would agree that this description of consumption represents an ideal they would like to achieve. However, for many consumers this is more of an abstract goal than a guide for how they actually acquire, use, and dispose of their possessions. The primary goal of this essay (authored by the TCR 2011 Sustainable Consumption track's participants), and indeed a key goal of the TCR community of marketing scholars, is therefore to help bridge the gap between agreement with the abstract concept of sustainable consumption and the adoption of sustainable day-to-day consumption behaviours.

Encouragingly, after an extensive review of hundreds of scholarly articles and industry reports on sustainable consumption, we uncovered a number of relatively recent trends that suggest that we are entering a new phase in the development of a more sustainable global marketplace. On the one hand, companies are still learning how to design and produce more sustainable products, and consumer attitudes are still evolving. This takes time. On the other hand, there is a significant amount of market experimentation happening, as both companies and consumers discover new ways to make consumption sustainable. What is most encouraging is that while much of this change is occurring within the boundaries of traditional business models and the constraints of current consumer habits, it is becoming increasingly clear that what is emerging is also a new set of options for sustainable consumption that offer additional benefits to consumers beyond simply being more sustainable. This is in sharp contrast to the view of some consumers that choosing to consume sustainably is actually constraining, limiting their options, and reducing their individual-level benefits (see, for example, Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, and Raghunathan 2010). In other words, these emerging trends and practices offer the promise of providing more options with an expanding set of consumer benefits, some of which are becoming possible due to a rethinking of the entire consumption cycle.

By examining expanded options and benefits at each of the three distinct stages of consumption (acquisition, usage, and disposition), we can highlight the different decision points a consumer faces when trying to consume sustainably, from the time they choose to buy a product, to how they use it, to how they dispose of it when no longer needed. Our focus in this essay will therefore be on the expanded options and benefits available to consumers at each stage of the consumption cycle, with the hope that consumers will come to see sustainable consumption choices as practical options that provide not only abstract benefits to society or the environment at large, but immediate benefits to themselves and their communities as well.

## **Purchase and Acquisition**

Many companies – and consumers – are re-evaluating traditional consumption behaviours and are increasingly challenging the traditional notion of consumption as a linear process where consumers acquire, use, and then throw away used goods. Throughout this essay, we will focus on the notion that consumption is a cycle, not a linear progression. For example, how consumers choose to dispose of possessions they no longer need impacts whether used goods will be available in the marketplace. However, given that the concept of consumption typically treats product purchase as the starting point, we begin our discussion here. We intentionally refer to purchase and acquisition (rather than simply "purchase") to

reflect an expanding set of options and benefits, beginning with options for purchasing new products and acquiring used products, as well as options – such as renting and borrowing – that address the acquisition of product utility without the need for ownership of a tangible good.

## Buying New

The availability of sustainable products is growing. For example, in 2010 there was a 73% increase in the number of “green products” on the market over the previous year (TerraChoice 2010), presumably reflecting an increased demand for such products from consumers. Consumers also appear to want more information about the sustainability of the myriad of product alternatives available, as reflected by the increasing number of third-party sources that provide information about the environmental and social attributes of a variety of products and brands, including those that do not explicitly communicate information about their sustainability (e.g., on their packaging or in their advertising). For example, the “GoodGuide” ([www.goodguide.com](http://www.goodguide.com)) provides sustainability information about a variety of products ranging from household cleaners to small appliances to cell phones, and consumers can access this information by viewing product rankings on the GoodGuide website or even scanning products in the aisle using mobile apps (see Table 1).

*Table 1 - Purchase and Acquisition Options*

Purchase and Acquisition Option		Organization	Website
<b>Buying new</b>	Miscellaneous Products	Good Guide	<a href="http://www.goodguide.com">www.goodguide.com</a>
	Miscellaneous Products	Buffalo Exchange Craigslist Ebay Trademe	<a href="http://www.buffaloexchange.com">www.buffaloexchange.com</a> <a href="http://www.craigslist.com">www.craigslist.com</a> <a href="http://www.ebay.com">www.ebay.com</a> <a href="http://www.trademe.co.nz">www.trademe.co.nz</a>
<b>Buying used</b>	Products for babies	Swap Baby Goods Shop and Swap 4 Baby	<a href="http://www.swapbabygoods.com">www.swapbabygoods.com</a> <a href="http://www.shopandswap4baby.com.au">www.shopandswap4baby.com.au</a>
	Miscellaneous Products	Erento ILetYou IRent2u Snapgoods Zilok	<a href="http://www.erento.co.uk">www.erento.co.uk</a> <a href="http://www.iletyou.com">www.iletyou.com</a> <a href="http://irent2u.com/">irent2u.com/</a> <a href="http://snapgoods.com">snapgoods.com</a> <a href="http://us.zilok.com">us.zilok.com</a>
<b>Renting/Leasing</b>	Car Renting	Flexicar Zipcar	<a href="http://www.flexicar.com.au">www.flexicar.com.au</a> <a href="http://www.zipcar.com">www.zipcar.com</a>
	DVDs	Netflix	<a href="http://www.netflix.com">www.netflix.com</a>
	Houses/rooms	Airbnb	<a href="http://www.airbnb.com">www.airbnb.com</a>
	Fashion Items	Bag Borrow or Steal	<a href="http://www.bagborroworsteal.com">www.bagborroworsteal.com</a>
	Miscellaneous Products	NeighborGoods	<a href="http://new.neighborgoods.net">new.neighborgoods.net</a>
<b>Borrow/Share</b>	Cars	National Carshare	<a href="http://www.nationalcarshare.co.uk">www.nationalcarshare.co.uk</a>
	Clothing	Clothing Swaps Swishing	<a href="http://www.clothingswap.com">www.clothingswap.com</a> <a href="http://swishing.com/home">swishing.com/home</a>
	Food	Neighborhood Fruit	<a href="http://neighborhoodfruit.com">neighborhoodfruit.com</a>
	Garden Space	Urban Gardenshare	<a href="http://www.urbangardenshare.org">www.urbangardenshare.org</a>
	Hospitality	Couch surfing	<a href="http://www.couchsurfing.org">www.couchsurfing.org</a>
	Services	Timebanking	<a href="http://timebanks.org">timebanks.org</a>
	Toys	USA Toy Library Association International Toy Library Association	<a href="http://www.usatla.org">www.usatla.org</a> <a href="http://www.itla-toylibraries.org">www.itla-toylibraries.org</a>
	Work Space	Citizen Space	<a href="http://citizenspace.us">citizenspace.us</a>
<b>Postpone or Avoid Purchase</b>	Miscellaneous Products	New American Dream Alternative Gift Registry Voluntary Simplicity	<a href="http://www.alternativegiftregistry.org">www.alternativegiftregistry.org</a> <a href="http://voluntarysimplicity.org.uk">voluntarysimplicity.org.uk</a>

Retailers are also responding to the growing demand for sustainable products and for information about product sustainability. Wal-Mart, for example, is promoting the development of sustainability labels on all of its suppliers' products (Rosenbloom 2009). Thus, consumers increasingly have more options for purchasing products explicitly promoted as more sustainable and more options for assessing the relative sustainability of mainstream products that make no such claims. Further, the development of standardized labelling schemes offers the promise of simplifying the search for sustainable options as well as giving consumers greater confidence that the information they find about sustainability attributes is credible.

### **Buying Used**

Increasingly, consumers are choosing to purchase pre-owned or used products rather than only buying new goods. This choice extends the life of existing products and avoids the need for additional resources used in the production of new products. Charitable organizations have for a long time engaged in the sale of used goods and are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their appeals to fashion and the visual display of their merchandise (Brace-Govan and Binay 2010). Commercial organizations such as Buffalo Exchange ([www.buffaloexchange.com](http://www.buffaloexchange.com)) provide mainstream consumers with the opportunity to buy and sell clothing within their local area and also remove some of the barriers, perceptual and logistical, of the pre-owned marketplace.

Further, the Internet has greatly facilitated the trading of second hand goods. Ebay ([www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)) and Craigslist ([www.craigslist.com](http://www.craigslist.com)) provide large-scale platforms to connect buyers and sellers. For example, specialty websites such as "Swap Baby Goods" ([www.swapbabygoods.com](http://www.swapbabygoods.com)) and "Shop and Swap 4 Baby" ([www.shopandswap4baby.com.au](http://www.shopandswap4baby.com.au)) respond to parents' needs for high quality, lower cost baby clothes. Used goods marketplaces provide many benefits to consumers, in their roles as both buyer and seller. Buyers obtain goods at a lower cost, sellers get to dispose of unwanted possessions in a sustainable manner, and both buyers and sellers can benefit from an enhanced sense of community engagement.

### **Renting/Leasing**

Renting or leasing increases the intensity of use for a single product while also eliminating the need for each individual to purchase his/her own version (Hirschl, Konrad, and Scholl 2003). Renting is becoming increasingly popular across transportation options. Bike sharing programs exist in many cities throughout the world, including New York, Washington, London, and Melbourne. Furthermore, short term car leasing is also available through organizations such as Zipcar ([www.zipcar.com](http://www.zipcar.com)) and Flexicar ([www.flexicar.com.au](http://www.flexicar.com.au)). Consumers benefit through only having the vehicles when needed, while eliminating the need for storage and maintenance. Such programs may also offer consumers access to higher quality products than they could otherwise afford to own.

Rental programs extend to smaller purchases, such as tools. Home Depot provides tool rental for a fee that is much more affordable than an outright purchase. The Internet is also enabling consumer-to-consumer renting of a wide variety of products (e.g., [snapgoods.com](http://snapgoods.com) and [new.neighborgoods.net](http://new.neighborgoods.net)). Airbnb ([www.airbnb.com](http://www.airbnb.com)) enables individuals to rent out spare rooms or even houses that they are not currently using. Such programs provide consumers with flexibility because they can choose the specific version of a product they need at a given point in time while distributing the upfront purchase and maintenance costs across many consumers rather than a single individual or family.

## **Borrow/Share**

Borrowing or sharing is similar to renting/leasing in that it increases the use intensity of a particular good, though generally without any monetary exchange, typically enabled through social networks or other community settings (Belk 2010; Mont 2004). An example is National CarShare in the U.K. ([www.nationalcarshare.co.uk](http://www.nationalcarshare.co.uk)), which seeks to align consumers travelling similar journeys so that they can carpool together, rather than drive separately. Also, toy libraries provide parents with an opportunity to draw from a communal pool of toys (Ozanne and Ozanne 2011). Sharing has all the benefits of renting, but at a lower cost and with an enhanced community element, as it is provided for free.

## **Postpone or Avoid Purchase**

Yet another option that many consumers are considering, especially in light of current economic conditions, is the option to postpone some purchases – or even to reconsider and avoid purchases that are ultimately viewed as unnecessary. Voluntary simplifiers and downshifter seek to tread more lightly on the earth through reducing their overall consumption of material goods (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Etzioni 1998). The Center for a New American Dream ([www.newdream.org](http://www.newdream.org)) challenges the notion of the need for “more stuff.” The website seeks to inform consumers about ways to improve quality of life without material goods. Tools such as the Alternative Gift Registry ([www.alternativegiftregistry.org](http://www.alternativegiftregistry.org)) seek to make available non-material, homemade, second-hand, and environmentally friendly goods for life events that typically emphasize acquisition. Beyond the financial savings, many consumers are increasingly realizing that postponing or avoiding some purchases can enhance their lifestyles through simplification and a greater focus on activities that genuinely improve their quality of life, with little negative impact on wellbeing.

## **Usage**

While reducing overall consumption will always be a central tenet of sustainable living, we also explore the possibility that reduced consumption does not necessarily mean a reduction in the overall utility available for meeting consumers’ needs. We assume that consumers can learn to want less, but we also recognize that many of our basic needs as consumers are largely fixed and cannot be reduced easily (e.g., our need for transportation). Therefore, we must learn to use the products that we require in ways that promote an overall reduction in demand for scarce resources and the amount of waste produced at the end of the consumption cycle. In other words, although it is not possible or even desirable to eliminate consumption, it is necessary for us to become more thoughtful, selective, creative, and efficient consumers.

## **Efficient Consumption**

After having acquired the products that we need, sustainability goals are best met by using those products efficiently and extracting all the utility available in the products (i.e., not wasting) before disposing of them and considering new purchases. Gilg, Barr, and Ford (2005) suggest that consumers develop habitual practices in their homes with the goal of reducing overall usage of scarce resources. These practices include turning down the thermostat in winter and turning it up in summer, reducing the number of toilet flushes, washing clothes in cold water, line drying clothing after washing rather than using the electric dryer, turning off lights when leaving rooms, taking public transportation whenever possible, and unplugging electrical devices such as computers and cable receivers when not in use (i.e., reducing “vampire” energy use). These practices not only save energy, but also save consumers money.

Often overlooked in discussions of sustainable consumption practices is the value of maintaining products in optimal working order. For example, maintaining vehicles on a regular basis through tune-ups, repairs, and tire pressure monitoring ensures that they operate at peak efficiency and, therefore, minimizes their environmental impact while ensuring that they continue to meet our needs for the duration of their theoretical product lifespans (Cooper 2006). Many other useful examples of how to reduce rates of consumption (see Table 2), with the additional benefit of saving money, can be found on websites such as the Alliance for Climate Education’s “Do One Thing” campaign ([www.acespace.org/dot](http://www.acespace.org/dot), see also [www.strategyforsustainability.com/do-one-thing](http://www.strategyforsustainability.com/do-one-thing)).

*Table 2 - Product Usage Options*

Product Usage Option		Organization	Website
Efficient Consumption	Miscellaneous Products	Alliance for Climate Education	<a href="http://www.acespace.org/dot">www.acespace.org/dot</a>
		Strategy for Sustainability	<a href="http://www.strategyforsustainability.com/do-one-thing">www.strategyforsustainability.com/do-one-thing</a>
Repair or Refurbish	Bicycles	Western Sydney Cycling Network	<a href="http://www.westernsydneycyclingnetwork.com.au">www.westernsydneycyclingnetwork.com.au</a>
Repurpose	Miscellaneous Products	Etsy	<a href="http://www.etsy.com">www.etsy.com</a>
		Trash 2 Treasure	<a href="http://www.trash2treasure.com">www.trash2treasure.com</a>

**Slow Consumption**

In addition to using our products less and/or more efficiently, consumers are learning that product lifespans can be extended in many different ways. By holding on to possessions longer and delaying the decision to buy replacement products, the overall material throughput rate in our systems of provision can be reduced (Cooper 1994). However, marketing and fashion systems work very hard to persuade consumers that the utility of new products will be greater than the value of those already owned (Guiltinan 2009). Thus, the emotional durability of products is constantly under assault by marketing institutions reaching out to consumers in the media (Nieuwenhuis 2008). Design and engineering practices, such as the annual introduction of new automobile models, encourage the perception of obsolescence. The pace of technological change in many consumer electronic goods markets, such as those for cell phones and computers, is also used to powerful effect by marketing institutions whose sales and profit goals require frequent product replacement by consumers (Cooper 2004). For example, having replaced an older cellular phone with a new “smart phone” such as the iPhone, consumers soon experience technological and psychological obsolescence as newer, faster, more reliable models are introduced (e.g., 3G, 3GS, 4G versions).

Consumers can potentially resist this kind of psychological wear-out by focusing on the benefits or functionality they derive from products rather than the products themselves. For example, if a consumer’s need is perceived as “transportation” rather than “a car,” consumers’ options are automatically opened up to include a currently owned vehicle that may be aging but still provides adequate transportation, walking, riding a bicycle, taking public transportation, or sharing a ride with a friend. Consumers may actually find that focusing on benefits rather than only on material ownership is psychologically beneficial, freeing them to meet their needs in a variety of ways rather than through only one (or a very small number) of consumption options.

**Repair or Refurbish**

Another way to avoid psychological or technological obsolescence is to repair or refurbish possessions so that they still deliver the desired benefit (e.g., safe and comfortable



transportation) without losing their symbolic or aesthetic value. For example, the SCARPA ski boot refurbishing center in Boulder, Colorado is equipped to deal with blown-out buckles, matted Velcro straps, and chewed up boot tongues. SCARPA also offers walk-in service and accepts shipments of battered boots. Repairs can be made for \$60/hour. Compare this to new boots that can cost from \$500-\$900 a pair and the fact that every pair purchased is likely to be accompanied by another pair discarded. The City of Monterey, California promotes shoe repair, camera repair, furniture repair, bike repair, appliance repair, computer repair, and tool repair shops. Private businesses are responding as well. Nikon (cameras), Canon (printers, cameras), Apple (computers, iPods, iPhones, etc.), Sony (computers, camcorders, cameras, TVs), Raymarine (fishfinders, aquatic radars, GPS units), and many other manufacturers offer repair service or online service assistance links clearly promoted on their support websites. These public and private sector initiatives reflect a clear recognition that sustainable consumption requires the development of repair and refurbishment resources that have been greatly diminished in the “throw away and buy new” economy. Thus, making repair and remodelling services more readily available and cost effective provides consumers with viable alternatives to product disposal and replacement that both save money and avoid waste.

## **Repurpose**

Products that consumers are tired of or that are no longer functional need not be discarded. In many less affluent societies, few things go to waste and the materials in products that have served their useful life are usually repurposed to meet other needs. This practice is gaining traction in the U.S. and other affluent societies as consumers increasingly are realizing that products can be repurposed effectively to meet their own needs or those of other consumers, while at the same time saving money. The [www.etsy.com](http://www.etsy.com) website lists a variety of repurposed products that consumers have offered for sale. Any repurposed product purchased reduces environmental impact by substituting for the purchase of a new product (and its constituent raw materials and costs of production) to meet the same need. Of course, older products need not be sold when repurposed. When repurposed at home and kept to meet other household needs, these derived products reduce consumption in the same way. Numerous websites provide ideas and advice to consumers regarding how to repurpose used possessions when they have reached the end of their useful lives. For example, the [trash2treasure website \(trash2treasure.wordpress.com/category/repurposing-ideas\)](http://trash2treasure.wordpress.com/category/repurposing-ideas) offers repurposing ideas and practical advice on how to repurpose in a variety of product categories, from something as simple as reusing old t-shirts as rags to more effortful repurposing like turning an old bar stool into an end table with the aid of sanding and painting.

## **Disposition**

Much of what is purchased and consumed is thrown away in landfills, especially in first-world countries. There are, however, more sustainable disposition options available to consumers that extend the useful life of the product and minimize waste by keeping products that can still serve a functional purpose out of landfills.

## **Recycling**

Recycling is one of the most established means of diverting waste from landfills, both in practice and in the academic literature (Iyer and Kashyap 2007; Saphores, Nixon, Ogunseitan and Shapiro 2006; Shrum, Lowrey, and McCarty 1994). Many new services are being developed to help consumers recycle more and different kinds of materials beyond paper, plastic, and glass, including products like old electronics that are at the end of their useful life. For example, The National Center for Electronics Recycling (NCER) website

offers a convenient way for consumers to search for places to recycle used electronics in the U.S ([www.electronicrecycling.org/public](http://www.electronicrecycling.org/public)). Some manufacturers have recycling programs that allow consumers to return a used good directly to the manufacturer (e.g., Dell Computers). A clear benefit of choosing recycling over “trashing” an item for many consumers is knowing that doing so directly helps minimize waste, thus helping the environment. Further, there can be financial incentives for consumers to recycle. For example, RecycleBank ([www.recyclebank.com](http://www.recyclebank.com)) offers consumers the opportunity to earn points for recycling, which can then be redeemed for gift certificates and discounts. Recycling may also offer a better way to protect consumer privacy than simply “trashing” a used good. For example, Dell’s computer recycling program removes sensitive data from recycled hard drives (see Table 3).

Table 3 - Product Disposition Options

Product Disposition Option		Organization	Website
Recycling	Miscellaneous Products	Earth911	<a href="http://earth911.com">earth911.com</a>
		Environmental Protection Agency Plug-In eCycling Partners	<a href="http://www.epa.gov/osw/partnerships/plugin/partners.htm">www.epa.gov/osw/partnerships/plugin/partners.htm</a>
		National Centre for Electronics Recycling	<a href="http://www.electronicrecycling.org">www.electronicrecycling.org</a>
		Recyclebank	<a href="http://www.recyclebank.com">www.recyclebank.com</a>
Donation	Miscellaneous Products	Excess Access	<a href="http://www.excessaccess.com">www.excessaccess.com</a>
	Bikes	Goodwill Industries International	<a href="http://www.goodwill.org/get-involved/donate/">www.goodwill.org/get-involved/donate/</a>
	Cars	International Bicycle Fund	<a href="http://www.ibike.org/environment/recycling">www.ibike.org/environment/recycling</a>
	Cell phones	National Kidney Foundation	<a href="http://www.kidney.org/support/kidneycars/index.cfm">www.kidney.org/support/kidneycars/index.cfm</a>
Gifting	Miscellaneous Products	Make-a-Wish	<a href="http://www.wishla.org">www.wishla.org</a>
		Make-a-Wish Australia	<a href="http://www.makeawish.org.au">www.makeawish.org.au</a>
		Money 4 Mobiles	
Bartering & Selling Used Goods	Miscellaneous Products	Freecycle	<a href="http://www.freecycle.org">www.freecycle.org</a>
		The Really Really Free Market	<a href="http://www.reallyreallyfree.org">www.reallyreallyfree.org</a>
		The ReUseIt Network	<a href="http://www.reuseitnetwork.org">www.reuseitnetwork.org</a>
	Miscellaneous Products	Care to Trade	<a href="http://www.caretotrade.com">www.caretotrade.com</a>
		Craigslist	<a href="http://www.craigslist.com">www.craigslist.com</a>
		Ebay	<a href="http://www.ebay.com">www.ebay.com</a>
		Swapace	<a href="http://www.swapace.com">www.swapace.com</a>
		Swap.com	<a href="http://www.swap.com">www.swap.com</a>
		Trashbank	<a href="http://www.trashbank.com">www.trashbank.com</a>
		U-exchange	<a href="http://www.u-exchange.com">www.u-exchange.com</a>
Local Exchange Trading Systems	<a href="http://www.letslinkuk.net">www.letslinkuk.net</a>		
Books	Book Crossing	<a href="http://www.bookcrossing.com">www.bookcrossing.com</a>	
	Bookmooch	<a href="http://bookmooch.com">bookmooch.com</a>	
	Paperback Swap	<a href="http://www.paperbackswap.com">www.paperbackswap.com</a>	
	Read it Swap it	<a href="http://www.readitswapit.co.uk">www.readitswapit.co.uk</a>	
Games/movies	Goozex	<a href="http://www.goozex.com">www.goozex.com</a>	
	SwapSimple	<a href="http://www.swapsimple.com">www.swapsimple.com</a>	

**Donation**

Many organizations provide consumers with the option to donate their used possessions to benefit charitable organizations and causes, as evidenced by both increasing numbers of donors and donation locations (Mitchell, Montgomery, and Rauch 2009). Organizations like Goodwill Industries and the Salvation Army accept a variety of different types of used goods. There are also organizations that specialize in accepting particular types of goods. For

example, the National Cristina Foundation ([www.cristina.org](http://www.cristina.org)) accepts used computers to place in charities, schools, and other organizations. Donation can also be a viable way to dispose of goods that would be difficult for a consumer to find homes for on their own. The National Kidney Foundation's Kidney Cars program ([www.kidney.org/support/kidneycars](http://www.kidney.org/support/kidneycars)) accepts cars that a consumer can no longer drive (via a free tow). Websites like Excess Access ([www.excessaccess.com](http://www.excessaccess.com)) make it easy for consumers to find out what items are on the wish list of local charities to more easily match donors and charitable organizations. Benefits of donation (beyond avoiding waste) include the "warm glow" many consumers may experience from an altruistic act, expressing one's values through one's actions by supporting a cause, and tax incentives.

## **Gifting**

Gifting is clearly related to donation, in that a good leaves the possession of one consumer to pass to the possession of another, but the path of the good is typically more direct, going straight from the giver to the receiver (without passing through a charitable organization first). Gifting can occur within a social network or within a broader gift economy. Contemporary examples of gift economies include Burning Man, an annual desert gathering of artists (Kozinets 2002), and Freecycle ([www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)), a web-based community whose mission is to "build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources and eases the burden on our landfills while enabling our members to benefit from the strength of a larger community." Since its founding in 2003, Freecycle has spread to over 85 countries and over 8.5 million members. Freecycle members post information about used goods they no longer need, and other members claim them, resulting in both a sustainable disposition and acquisition option. The "Really, Really Free Markets" held in various cities across the U.S. serve a similar function in an in-person setting, rather than online: participants bring and give away useable items for free ([www.reallyreallyfree.org](http://www.reallyreallyfree.org)). An important benefit of gifting from one individual to another is that the consumer knows who is receiving their used good, allowing them to feel comfortable that the good will be both needed and cared for by its new owner. Gifting within a gift economy also has the added benefit of building a sense of community among givers and receivers.

## **Bartering and Selling Used Goods**

Barter is a method of exchange by which goods or services are directly exchanged for other goods or services without using a medium of exchange, such as money (O'Sullivan and Sheffrin 2003). Consumer-to-consumer barter activity has increased in recent years, facilitated by the Internet. For example, [www.Goozex.com](http://www.Goozex.com) is an online trading platform allowing consumers to swap DVDs and video games. A number of similar sites facilitate consumer-to-consumer trading of books (e.g., [www.BookMooch.com](http://www.BookMooch.com), [www.ReadItSwapIt.co.uk](http://www.ReadItSwapIt.co.uk), [www.PaperBackSwap.com](http://www.PaperBackSwap.com), and [www.BookCrossing.com](http://www.BookCrossing.com)). Other sites exist to encourage and facilitate consumer-to-consumer barter of a wide range of items (e.g. [www.u-exchange.com](http://www.u-exchange.com), [www.trashbank.com](http://www.trashbank.com), [www.caretotrade.com](http://www.caretotrade.com), and [www.swapace.com](http://www.swapace.com)). Although not technically barter systems, "complementary currencies" typically emphasize consumer-to-consumer exchange and are very similar to barter networks (Schroeder, Miyazaki, and Fare 2011; Seyfang 2006). Indeed, many barter networks use some form of currency to facilitate exchange among members. For example, Goozex users accumulate points by mailing in DVDs and video games and then spend these points on media submitted by other users.

Consumers can also sell their used goods using more traditional exchange systems and currencies, both online via numerous websites and in person at yard/garage/estate sales and swap meets. Bartering, complementary currencies, and more traditional methods of selling used goods all offer consumers additional benefits beyond keeping products out of landfills, the most obvious of which is compensating consumers for the possessions they are giving

up, either in kind or via currency. We note that other benefits may also be obtained, including connecting to a community, meeting other like-minded consumers, and building relationships with transaction partners.

## Conclusion

Harvard Business School marketing professor Theodore Levitt famously told his students that "People don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole!" Similarly, Christensen, Cook, and Taddy (2005) suggest that marketers need to think about the "job" that consumers want to "hire a product" to do for them. The point that these scholars and many others have made is best summarized by Mont (2004), who argued that "people do not necessarily want a material product, rather the utility, function, value, or service the product delivers (p. 139)." We believe that rethinking the consumer marketplace by focusing on consumer benefits as opposed to material ownership, as illustrated in this essay, will not only speed progress towards a more sustainable marketplace, but also has the potential to increase value to consumers through expanding consumption options and offering benefits not possible with a primarily "new product purchase-use-throw away" linear consumption paradigm.

Our objective throughout this essay was to illustrate how this value can be created by rethinking the entire consumption cycle. While reducing the ownership of physical goods clearly has the potential to save consumers money, many other benefits are possible, including simplifying consumption through reduced storage and maintenance needs building a sense of community by sharing and trading possessions, providing higher quality and customized products per usage situation, and better aligning consumers' sustainability oriented values and their consumption behaviour. While further progress in this direction will take time and investment from manufacturers and retailers, we hope that the set of examples we have provided demonstrates that many companies are both successfully moving in this direction and, indeed, depend on the differentiation and value provided by these various forms of alternative consumption.

Returning to the original motivation for this essay, this broad evolution of the consumer marketplace is, we believe, a critical element in the movement towards a sustainable marketplace in which society is able to meet the needs of future generations as well as it meets those of current consumers. Many of the tools to enable this marketplace exist today, from the design and engineering skills required to develop products that last, to the promotional and logistical skills required to positively modify consumer behaviour, deliver value, and ensure a return of resources to begin the cycle anew. What is needed is greater recognition of the changes already underway and acknowledgement of the fundamental reasons for these changes. We believe that marketing academicians can play an important role in changing the way both industry and consumers see sustainability by encouraging the view espoused in this essay, that sustainable consumption is not limiting, but rather provides expanded options and benefits to consumers. The value-based perspective we adopt in this essay, as well as the need to explore not just sustainable purchasing but also sustainable usage and disposition, can serve as a critical impetus for additional scholarly research on how sustainable consumption can be embraced by industry and consumers alike. Doing so will benefit not just future generations, but, as we have argued, building a sustainable marketplace will do an even better job of meeting consumers' – and society's – needs today.

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