Ethical consumerism.

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At its most basic level, *ethical consumerism* refers to the practice of purchasing products or services that are manufactured or delivered using the most non-harmful available means. Its advocates seek to minimize the social and environmental impacts of consumption by actively seeking not to support products, services, or companies that use damaging or exploitative practices. Examples of such practices include labor exploitation and the use of raw materials or manufacturing techniques that are known to cause unnecessary environmental damage.

Commercial free range hens. Adam Ward [CC BY-SA 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons

A Dall's Porpoise entangled in a fishing net; "dolphin safe" fishing movement grew out of these incidents. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Ethical consumerism can also extend into politics and personal philosophy , as some people elect not to give their patronage to enterprises whose apparent values or viewpoints do not align with theirs. For example, a devoted vegan might choose not to purchase foods or beverages from a company that produces meat or animal-based products, even if the particular food or beverage in question is suitable for a vegan diet. Similarly, a consumer might elect not to support a company with significant material investments in governments, countries, or business partnerships that include controversial or otherwise objectionable policies.

Background

One of the earliest well-known examples of ethical consumerism began in 1965, with an incident known as the Delano Grape Strike . In September 1965, Filipino and Mexican laborers went on strike in the grape-producing regions of Delano, California in protest of low pay and poor working conditions. The labor walkout quickly grew to include thousands of farm workers who committed themselves to a law-abiding, peaceful protest.

Over the next five years, millions of American consumers boycotted California table grapes produced by growers who did not employ unionized workers. The campaign was an eventual success and resulted in labor contracts that guaranteed California grape workers increased pay and benefits.

As an organized movement, ethical consumerism is rooted in the work of associations like the National Consumers League (NCL), which was founded in 1899 to help protect the interests of workers and shoppers. Initially devoted to labor law issues, the NCL expanded its scope to include shopper education programs during the 1970s. Supported by the work of researchers and academics, grassroots activist groups worked to expose unfair and unethical business practices and became increasingly prominent during the 1980s. By the end of the decade, responsible consumerism had emerged as a niche movement that occupied a relatively small but visible space in the economic landscape. The 1989 launch of *Ethical Consumer* , a magazine published by the United Kingdom-based Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA), gave the growing movement its name.

According to the ECRA, the resultant consumerist movement developed in three distinct phases. First, the 1980s saw increased boycott activity targeting goods that supported business interests deemed by the public to be unjust. For example, consumers in the United Kingdom and around the world united during the mid-1980s to reject South African-produced fruits and textiles as a means of opposing the country's racial apartheid policies. Then, during the 1990s, a growing number of companies responded to the increasingly prominent ethical consumerism trend by introducing socially responsible brands purported to minimize the negative impacts of production. Finally, during the first decade of the 2000s, ethical consumerism emerged as a mainstream concern. Thanks in large part to the rise of Internet-based information technologies, consumers became more informed and aware of the impact of their choices than ever before, which created sharp growth in so-called ethical markets. Enterprises of all sizes responded to this market growth by introducing an increasing number of products and services designed to satisfy the concerns of shoppers looking to minimize the social and environmental consequences of their consumption habits.

Topic Today

Labor practices are a core concern of contemporary ethical consumerism. The World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO), an international agency that operates in more than seventy countries, has established a set of guiding principles that companies can follow to be more socially responsible and consumers can use to help guide their purchases and choices. The creation of market opportunities for small-scale and independent producers is a key element of WFTO policy, as is the rejection of child labor , forced labor, and so-called " sweatshop " labor. "Sweatshop" is an informal term for a production facility, typically located in a developing country, that employs low-paid workers in poor conditions who must often work extremely long hours. Sweatshops are particularly prevalent in the clothing, textile, and manufacturing industries.

The WFTO also supports environmental responsibility, which is another area of urgent focus for ethical consumerists. Reducing the ecological impact of production processes includes choosing raw materials that are drawn from sources that do not contribute to problems like pollution, deforestation, and the contamination of natural habitats. From this viewpoint, it is also desirable to support businesses that choose procurement, production, and distribution methods that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and, whenever possible, use clean or renewable sources of energy. One particularly visible aspect of this element of ethical consumerism is the "buy local" movement, which has become especially prevalent in the food and beverage industries. Similarly, to entice ethical consumers, many companies have moved to advertise their low carbon footprint or negative carbon footprint to demonstrate their commitment to ethical production.

Ethical consumerism can also be political in nature. For example, in 2016, citizen advocacy groups in Southern Ontario, Canada banded together to protest government policies regarding paid commercial access to provincial water resources. The controversy centered on Nestle S.A., the world's largest food company in terms of annual revenues, which renewed its water-taking permits at several Southern Ontario sites as part of its bottled-water production operations. In so doing, Nestle blocked the attempts of the local community of Centre

Wellington to secure a stable, long-term water source for its rapidly growing population, which prompted outrage from many area residents. The resultant calls to boycott Nestle products made international headlines, with opponents of Nestle's bottled water operations citing environmental as well as ethical concerns.

While the rise of ethical consumerism has signaled a general shift toward more socially and environmentally responsible choices, it has also drawn some criticism. Some have argued that it has essentially become a vehicle for the well-to-do to display their wealth, as ethical alternatives are generally more expensive than products made using standard production methods. Others posit that the movement has failed to produce any large-scale political or economic change, while noting that many multinational corporations, which have otherwise shown little to no interest in fair trade or responsible production principles, have adopted shallow, ineffectual forms of ethical production in an attempt to capitalize on growing market demand.

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