

SF anti-consumerism group 'staggered by response' Members of 'the Compact' vowed to buy few new items in 2006

Kate Boyd, a teacher, shops at Scrap with her friend's son, Ben Perry-Picciotto. Chronicle photo by Deanne Fitzmaurice



Chronicle / Deanne Fitzmaurice

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(02-16) 14:50 PST SAN FRANCISCO -- A small group of Bay Area residents who made an informal vow to not buy anything new in 2006 have found themselves in the middle of an international fury over consumerism, ecology and middle-class hypocrisy that has spread around the world in just days.

"It's been totally insane. We've had a lot of people say we're smug, self-congratulatory braggarts," John Perry, one of the founders of the original Compact group, said today. He has spent much of the week fielding calls from national TV and radio stations.

"And we've had other people say it gives them hope for the future. It has definitely touched a nerve," he said. "We've been staggered by the response."

The Compact, named after the Mayflower pilgrims' revolutionary credo, started at a dinner party two years ago as a way to fight what members consider a rampant consumer culture wreaking global ecological havoc.

After a few trial runs, about 50 extended friends decided to go an entire year without buying anything new besides food, health and safety items and underwear.

But the group's agenda has apparently struck a chord -- both positive and negative -- around the world.

Since their story was reported Monday in The Chronicle, they've been besieged with hundreds of e-mails and dozens of media calls.

More than 350 people have joined the Compact, and chapters are appearing in virtually every U.S. city as well as London, Sydney, Tokyo, Jerusalem, Toronto, Edmonton, New Zealand, Spain, Romania and other international locales.

New members, who sign up on the group's Yahoo Web site, include seniors on fixed incomes, farmers in Alabama and self-proclaimed shop-aholics who say they "have a problem and need help."

They've been joined by denizens of sparsely populated Pacific islands where recycling is a necessity rather than an option, high school students and one person in Kansas who said, "I thought I was the only one. Now I've found my tribe."

"People seem intrigued, which is good," said Kate Boyd, a drama teacher at Lick-Wilmerding High School in San Francisco who's one of the original members. "It has been overwhelming. But if it's at least making people think, then it's worthwhile."

But, like all instant celebrities, the Compact has been subjected to ridicule and criticism as well. There's even an anti-Compact group that's sprung up on an Internet news and discussion site.

The original Compacters aren't sure what to make of the backlash. They were never out to convert anyone, start a political movement or inflict dogma on anyone else. The intention was to merely to "reduce the impact of consumer culture in our lives" in a lighthearted and social manner.

"I've also been attacked personally for being in marketing," said Perry, who works for a Silicon Valley high-tech company. "One person said that's like a pimp preaching abstinence. Then someone else said it was like a sinner seeking penitence -- who better?"

Another stream of criticism has focused on whether the Compact will ultimately hurt the economy. If everyone stopped shopping, the argument goes, wouldn't that kill a huge sector of the national economy?

No, the Compacters say, it wouldn't.

"Wal-Mart is doing a lot more to kill jobs in America than we are," Perry said.

Peter Sealey, adjunct marketing professor at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business, pointed out that there will always be a need for stores that sell new things, because used things eventually wear out.

In other words, Pottery Barn is probably safe.

As then there's been the predictable flurry of mockery about the Compact being an "only in San Francisco" phenomenon.

"The Clear Channel AM radio station in L.A. treated it like this is a Bay Area thing through and through," Perry said. "I'm waiting to hear from Bill O'Reilly next."

Sarah Pelmas, a dean at University High School in San Francisco and one of the original Compacters, said she's amazed at the extreme responses the Compact has provoked.

"People seem very threatened by it," she said. "But people all over the world live this way all the time. It's not like it's some revolutionary, or even consistent, thing we're doing. But I have been furiously questioned by some people about it -- one person said, 'I bet you still buy gas.' "

That sort of response is exactly why the Compact is needed, Perry said.

"If it's national news when a small group of professionals decide not to buy anything new, and it bothers people so much, it really speaks to how deep we are into consumerism in this country," he said.

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