

Ever wonder how your shopping habits affect impoverished children? These 4 tips can make a better world

BY KAREN STILLER



# How to be an Ethical Consumer

**B**ACK IN MY TEENS, I LIVED FOR A FEW months with a very poor family in Colombia. I returned to Canada, pledging to live simply and consume ethically for the rest of my life. The vow lasted about a month.

My zest was diminished by a long list of things I thought I couldn't buy, questions I felt obligated to ask, and my inability to wear clothing made of hemp. As committed as I thought I was to ethical consumption, my comfy Canadian lifestyle swept me away.

Lately, my family and I have been rethinking our surrender to consumerism, our adherence to "the lowest price

is the law," and how it all may relate to the picture of a sponsored child stuck on our refrigerator door.

Being an ethical consumer does not mean constant self-denial, a wardrobe of scratchy clothing, and hard-to-find coffee. It means thinking about how our purchases impact the planet and the people who produce the goods. With a little research and conviction, any Canadian can take steps toward being an ethical consumer.

## BUY LESS, BUY BETTER

Steve Bell, a singer-songwriter from Winnipeg, admits he is not a "poster boy" for

ethical consumption. But years ago, he and his family began attending a church that emphasized social justice, which led him to question consumerism. The Bells started making conscious choices about what they buy, where they buy it, and why. Steve's tips are simple: "Use your computer for a year longer than you might otherwise. Buy a good car and drive it into the ground. Wear out your clothes," he encourages.

Why does this make a difference? Maryruth Priebe, a child sponsor from Calgary, says it "helps avoid having to purchase the same item multiple times." Any harm done in the manufacturing of the item—to the environment

wages that don't cover basic living expenses. Or children are hired to work during daytime hours, preventing them from going to school.

Sheryl's not afraid to ask store managers about where and how their products are made. She has even written and called company headquarters to learn more. The Internet is a logical place to do research. Conduct a web search on the company, or enter the words "ethical consumption" into a search engine. By refusing to buy clothing made in sweatshops or by children who aren't in school—and voicing your concerns to retailers—you send a message that workers and their children matter.

## Say the words "fair trade" and most people think of coffee, but that's only a drop in the pot.

or the producers themselves—is reduced by not making the same item repeatedly, she adds. It's better to buy good-quality items that last longer, "rather than the cheaper varieties."

### JOIN THE LIKE-MINDED

It's easier to do just about anything when you're part of a group. For Steve, his church community was a logical place to get a conversation going about ethical consumption. Your local community centre, library, or health food store can also be good connecting places. For Sheryl Spencer of Guelph, Ontario, it's her connection with "greener-type" friends and colleagues that helps her keep up-to-date on the latest trends in ethical buying. If you are doing it alone, the Internet can be a useful resource for newsletters and chat forums about ethical consumption.

### DO YOUR HOMEWORK


Sheryl buys most of her clothing second-hand. But when she does hit the mall, she's on "sweatshop alert." Most clothing is manufactured in developing countries and exported to Canada. In some instances, people are forced to work long hours in dangerous conditions for

### SHOP FAIR TRADE

More and more consumers are seeking out "fair trade" products and companies. This means the farmers or producers are guaranteed fair prices for their goods, safe working conditions, and good wages.

Say the words "fair trade" and most people think of coffee, but that's only a drop in the pot. Chantal Harard of TransFair Canada in Ottawa, which monitors all fair trade products in Canada, says, "The range of products will increase in Canada soon." For now, consumers who are willing to go the extra mile—sometimes literally—can purchase fair trade coffee, tea, assorted fruit, sports balls, and even flowers in some parts of Canada.

Janice Melanson runs a shop called Dix Mille Villages ("Ten Thousand Villages") in Montreal that imports, fairly, a large variety of goods from the developing world. She says purchasing fair trade sugar, coffee, and gifts "is an effective way for an individual to significantly impact the lives of the producers."

All the ethical consumers interviewed for this story said the same thing: simply knowing that they are living—and shopping—according to their own values was enough to keep them committed. "By being aware of how my purchases affect others, perhaps even those in the same villages as my sponsored children," says Maryruth, "I hope to be part of a solution for many of the problems we are now trying to remedy." 

## Making it Fair

While you do your part to be a savvy consumer, World Vision is doing its part in Canada and overseas

### LOBBYING GOVERNMENT

Many of the international trade policies that prevent poor producers from receiving a fair price for their goods are made at the government level. World Vision lobbies the Canadian government to end trade policies that are unfair. Staff members also work for stronger rules to ensure that Canadian companies operating in developing nations do not violate human rights or exploit natural resources. World Vision supports the Make Poverty History campaign and the Micah Challenge, both global efforts to press for trade and investment rules that benefit the poor while protecting the environment.

### PRESENTING A UNITED FRONT

World Vision is involved with international working groups such as the Fair Trade Symposium, which calls on developed countries to trade in ways that ensure fair, safe, and profitable working conditions for producers. With World Vision's support, farmers from northern Brazil participated in a symposium during important World Trade Organization meetings in Hong Kong last December.

### CURBING CHILD LABOUR

The United Nations estimates that there are 250 million child labourers in the world today. One-third of them are engaged in work defined as "exploitative and hazardous to their health and well-being." World Vision lobbies governments for regulations that prevent children from being exploited by coercive, enslaving work, such as the sex trade, or employed in conditions hazardous to their health or make it difficult for them to go to school.

### HOW DO YOU "MAKE IT FAIR?"

*Do you make ethical consumer choices? Do you have tips to share with other Childview readers? Send us a letter by mail, fax, or e-mail. (See page 3 for contact information.) We'd love to hear from you.*