

Vroom! Tell Santa why you want an SUV

THE basic principles of advertising are simple. You, the consumer, are incomplete without the product – any product – whatever the product may be. You're flawed, weak, somewhat repulsive and always incomplete. You're an empty vessel without an identity – waiting for the right sneakers, jeans or beer to come along and complete you. Of course the products never quite deliver. You buy the right breath mint, but your sex life still sucks. It turns out peppermint can't quite give you personality.

Sociologists studied happiness in the 1950s, leading to the creation of the field of Happiness Studies. What we learned in the Happiness Surveys of the 1950s was that, when surveyed, people consistently listed personal autonomy, control of their lives, self esteem, loving relationships, happy family, relaxed leisure time and friends as what they most desired. New cars, big houses, swimming pools and kitchen appliances were at the bottom of the list.

The problem for businesses is that the things that really make people happy aren't commodities that can be bought and sold. If two people can fall in love and blissfully bask naked in each other's company, nothing is being consumed. There's no profit to be made by people walking on the beach enjoying each other's presence. If someone is secure with whom they are, and if they truly respect themselves, then they are less likely to need to try in vain to redefine themselves through objects. If they realize control of their own lives, they're less likely to give up that control to credit card debt. If they spend quality time

with their families, they're less likely to need to try to buy the love and approval of their children with expensive toys.

Knowing all of this, advertisers try to position their products as being able to deliver the very human experiences that people seek. So Nike becomes more than a pair of shoes made by desperately poor sweatshop workers. In diametric opposition to reality, Nike becomes, ironically, the very symbol of freedom and liberation. Americans, working increasingly long hours and mired in debt, set themselves free by wearing Nikes to the call center. They eat their breath mints and spend billions on internet pornography. They drink Molson, but life is the same the next day, except they're hung over. And in a never-ending quest for an all-illusory slice of power, independence and rebellion, the weakest and dumbest among us shroud themselves in tons of armor, taking to the highways in their shining new SUVs.

No happiness for Wal Mart

Two weeks ago on Friday, Americans celebrated Black Friday, the opening of the Christmas shopping season. And we also celebrated Buy Nothing Day – an international day of resistance to mindless consumerism and its ensuing environmental and social costs. Normally you can only get serious coverage of Buy Nothing Day in the alternative press. And you can always count on NPR reporters to end their broadcasts with a patronizing disparaging comment about the holiday – as if the desire to spend quality time with friends instead of shopping was such a revolutionary concept as to warrant immediate disparagement and dismissal.

This year, however, something weird happened. Wal Mart crashed on Buy Nothing Day, with sales plummeting ten percent from last year. I'm not delusional. I know this statistical blip doesn't portend a new national consciousness and morality – especially in light of last month's election results. The international resistance to mindless consumerism didn't kick off with an intentional kick to Wal Mart's groin. No. People who gave a damn about the world, about ethics and about morality, wouldn't have been shopping in Wal Mart in the first place if they could help it – not last year and not this year. This wasn't a boycott or a Buy Nothing Day Celebration.

What we saw this year on Black Friday was the end result of the upward redistribution of wealth that has been occurring in this country since the Reagan presidency. As people got poorer and poorer, they were forced to shop at the cheapest stores. This means Wal Mart. Not counting automobile sales, they now account for a whopping ten percent of American retail sales.

China's fifth column

With Wal Mart operating as a virtual fifth column for China, dumping sweatshop booty on the American Market while vacuuming our currency into the Chinese treasury, their growth has also contributed to the collapse of America's manufacturing sector. Put simply, American companies employing American workers couldn't deliver products to Wal Mart for the same low prices that Wal Mart's Chinese suppliers could. Hence, in order to continue to supply Wal Mart, American companies were forced to close shop at home and outsource production to China. The resultant layoffs meant more poor people shopping the bottom line – at Wal Mart. It's an ugly cycle.

Wal Mart's drop in Black Friday sales this year isn't the bellwether for economic collapse, however. Overall Black Friday sales were up close to five percent over last year, with many upscale stores experiencing double-digit increases. What Wal Mart and other budget stores are experiencing is the bottom falling out of the American economy as the poor and middle class continue a 25-year trend of downward mobility while the wealthy get wealthier. The Wal Mart cycle has, in effect, consumed its own consumers. Underpaid and unemployed workers are migrating from Wal Mart to the Dollar Store while the nouveau riche gorge themselves.

SUV gluttony

This brings us to the ultimate in Christmas season gluttony – a new highway hording gas guzzling smog belching menacing meandering growling hulk of an SUV. Watching the advertising industry sell this most powerful of toys to those among us with the weakest minds is truly theater of the absurd.

Ford's "Built Tough" new beast is a dweeb's wet dream, complete with a "Power Stroke" "Longest Lasting" turbo diesel that's "Unsurpassed." Ford promises an "All Hail to the King" when you hit the highway, adding that "Most Things With This Much Power Have Been Overthrown." Great. Just the car you need for quick trips to the mall. Then there's Nissan's Frontier. "It doesn't have a feminine side to get in touch with." Of course not. It's a damn car.

How about the new Dodge Durango. Chrysler promises that it's a "Big Fat Juicy Cheeseburger in the Land of Tofu." How's that for engineering. It sounds like the perfect car if you want to terrorize Ithaca, so go ahead this Christmas and "Grab Life by the Horns." How about "Making a Bold Gesture to Everyone on the Road?" You can do this with your new Dodge as well, or you can just flip the bird out the window of your Yugo. Or "When the Asteroid Hits and Civilization Crumbles, You'll be Ready" in your Hummer – that is, assuming that the post-civilized world has plenty of working gas stations.

VROOM! TELL SANTA WHY YOU WANT AN SUV / 4

Confused as to why you would do something as antisocial as buying a Hummer (the only car named after a blow job)? General Motors assures us that your careful decision was made because it's "Badass."

Yeah, you're bad

If you're not quite so badass, you can still "Live Large, Be Strong and Flaunt It" by blazing a trail to Tops in your new Chevy Trail Blazer. It doesn't matter how pathetic of a putz you were before buying a Trail Blazer, the ad copy promises instant transformation: "You are a Strong and Powerful Trendsetter." I now see dozens of these idiot trendsetters every time I leave my house.

The weirdest of this season's SUV ads comes to us from Lincoln. Their new advertisement for their Aviator starts with a homey biographic blurb about "Carlos," a New York City bicycle messenger – who truth be told, would probably just as soon piss on an SUV as look at one. Carlos, according to the ad, maneuvers "by reflex and bursts of acceleration... it's a constant adrenaline rush." Like Carlos, the 13 m.p.g. Navigator "follows the NYC bike messenger's lead. [It's] Nimble, alert and able to anticipate." Weighing in at 6,110 pounds (gross vehicle weight), the Aviator, like Carlos' bike, "is lightweight and strong." Reality doesn't seem to be a concern here. Lincoln promises that you can "follow the NYC bike messenger's lead" and "get around Manhattan in a hurry" in this 16-foot long seven-foot wide behemoth. Right. Oh yeah, messengers give each other "colorful street names" like "Lincoln Aviator."

Like most ads, the Navigator ad is a direct assault on reality. There is no stupider way to inch through congested smog-laden urban traffic than in a bloated four-wheel-drive mud-spraying creek-fording SUV. But they promise that the "power of the Lincoln Aviator may also supply a daily source of adrenaline." You can buy the Aviator and be Carlos. So next time you're stuck in traffic, rev your 302 horsepower engine. There – You're a big guy. Doesn't that feel better than a life.

Take control of your own life this Christmas season and think for yourself.

Join the fun sport of SUV tagging – see www.changingtheclimate.com.