

Split Personalities

finding yourself of two minds about a purchase? you're not alone

There's this perplexing trait that's been obsessing me for a couple of years now. It manifests itself in a shopping behavior – we at FRCH's Brand Development Group have been calling it "consumer dissonance" – that has been spreading across all manner of retail market segments.

Cognitive dissonance – a psychological term – describes the ability to hold two opposing ideas in one's head at the same time. Consumer dissonance follows the same lines.

We first started noticing it a few years back with the debut of the charmingly named Hardee's Monster Thickburger. How was it, we asked, that a product called the Thickburger – perhaps the greatest artery-clogger to emerge from our nation's fast-food establishments – could flourish in a year when our national obsession with diets makes the cover of *Newsweek*? Against this seemingly pathological fixation with "eating right," a burger with two-thirds of a pound of beef, eight pieces of bacon, 1420 calories, 107 grams of fat and an entire day's worth of sodium generated a 27 percent spike in sales.

I wish I had a dollar for every time a consumer told me how much she loves the no-brand approach of American Apparel, only to reach into her Chanel purse for her bling-encrusted Blackberry.

Similarly, just as Dove launched its feel-good campaign on natural beauty, more women than ever were sneaking out of work during their lunch hours to inject a "safe" form of botulism into their foreheads. OK, perhaps it's just me, but do the words "safe" and "botulism" make strange bedfellows? That aside, Botox is about as far from natural beauty as you can get in your average lunch



hour – and light years away from Dove parading a cavalcade of women across a billboard, telling us, "We feel great about ourselves!"

Around that same time, the two biggest stories in the automotive world were the Hummer and the Prius. Not only were there states where these two vehicles were dominating, but there were even households buying both. How could it be that the same household that bought an environmental crusader like the Prius would also spring for a beast like the H2 – a vehicle that has trouble making it down to the corner without draining the tank?

Hypocrisy? No, just consumer dissonance. Start looking for this and you'll see it everywhere.

We recoil with each nationwide furor over food scares while gobbling down sushi. We howl in protest as our personal information is available to spammers and yet we set up MySpace pages that tell the world every cringingly embarrassing detail about us. And I wish I had a dollar for every time a consumer in a focus group told me how much she loves the no-brand, no-frills approach of American Apparel, only to reach into her Chanel

Ordering a Diet Coke with that bacon cheeseburger demonstrates the dissonance today's consumers exhibit in their buying decisions.

purse with the giant logo when her bling-encrusted Blackberry goes off.

Gone are the days when retailers could just stick a product on the shelf and snag giant tribes of customers following the same trend. These days it can all seem a little more like herding cats. All of which bears out the age-old adage: That's what makes a horse race. The world is the fascinating, eclectic, multi-dimensional place that it is because we don't all like the same stuff. And we all need to remind ourselves to recognize and celebrate this.

Still, now we're not even agreeing with ourselves. I can't help thinking the next few years are going to be one hell of a ride. We've all started to get used to the concept of decreasing niches and the "Market of One." But what about the "Market of One-Half"? ●



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