

Ducking the issue

By Stuart White
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I unashamedly tried and enjoyed foie gras at a lovely little restaurant in Cape Town some weeks back. As far as I knew at the time I was simply choosing some delicious home-made duck liver pate from the menu. I was quite ignorant about how the product got to my plate, unaware that to produce foie gras (which literally means "fatty liver"), workers ram pipes down male ducks' or geese's throats two or three times daily and pump as much as 4 pounds of grain and fat into the animals' stomachs, causing their livers to bloat to up to 10 times their normal size. Many birds have difficulty standing because of their engorged livers, and they may tear out their own feathers and cannibalise each other out of stress. They are kept in tiny wire cages or packed into sheds and on some farms, a single worker may be expected to force-feed 500 birds three times each day. Because of this rush, animals are often treated roughly and left injured and suffering.

The whole process is nothing short of the worst form of animal cruelty imaginable. I feel quite sickened by my own indulgence now and I'll be making a special effort to avoid it in future, yet many eat it conscience free – ironically usually in fine dining establishments. The end, to them, justifies the means and they're quite prepared to pay plenty for the privilege.

At the other end of the spending scale is the American discount retail giant, Wal-Mart, the world's largest company. It came under the spotlight this week because it is facing a gender discrimination suit. It began in 2001 when 6 female Wal-Mart workers accused the company of denying equal pay to female workers which is threatening to turn into a class-action lawsuit covering a million female workers who have ever worked in Wal-Mart stores in the past decade – an action that could end up costing the company more than a billion dollars. On top of this, Wal-Mart's PR image has been under scrutiny a number of times in the past. Accused of crushing the unionisation of its employees, shirking on employee's healthcare benefits and buying products produced in sweatshops throughout the world are just some of the issues that could be considered image catastrophes.

For example:

- Nearly three-quarters of a million women workers earn, on average, \$6.10 per hour, putting many of their families below the poverty level.
- Women who make pants in El Salvador earn 15 cents for each pair; Wal-Mart sells these pants for \$16.95 in its U.S. stores.
- Women in Central America who make clothes for Wal-Mart live in shacks while women in China live nine to twelve to a room in government-provided dormitories.

So given all that, what I am really interested in is what's the possible damage to Wal-Mart's reputation and profit margin because of the purported discrimination against woman? Minimal it would appear. When Wal-Mart was receiving bad publicity a few years back, its customers were polled and it was found that only 6% of them even cared about these issues and no-one indicated that they would stop shopping at Wal-Mart, even though woman are Wal-Mart's core shoppers. According to American researcher, Brett Beener, "If I have learned one thing, it's that you have to do something really awful, to screw up your customer base, especially if you are a discounter". Just as with the high-end diners, so it is with low-end shoppers – the end justifies the means. So Wal-Mart continues to grow and produce sterling profits. (In 2000, Wal-Mart's assets totaled more than the GDP of 155 of the 192 countries in the world, with annual sales of more than \$137.6 billion) despite their shocking behaviour.

Ditto drinks giant Coca Cola. Plagued for years with accusations of bad labour practice, child-exploitation, pollution of water sources in India, Mexico, Ghana and elsewhere; giving executives hundreds of millions of dollars in stock options and bonuses while laying off thousands of employees and being accused of killing of trade unionist employees in South America, people still consume enough Coke to keep the company at the top of the soft drinks tree. Again, the end justifies the means! Foie gras is an abominable product, Wal-Mart is the world's worst employer, Coca Cola is killing the planet. Yet all these industries and practices continue to succeed because lets face it, people don't really care – well not enough it seems. Whether we crave fancy food, fizzy drinks or a shopping bargain, greed and selfishness supercede and suppress questions regarding the cost they all come at to someone or something. To paraphrase Hamlet, 'thus lack of conscience does make cowards of us all'.

So what do we need to do to shift this consumer consciousness, this personal selfishness? I am not sure... I don't shop at Wal-Mart but I wonder where Mr. Price's goods come from, at what cost, and how they treat their employees. I need to find out. There are enough obvious compelling reasons for never eating foie gras again and you know what, I can live without Coke. As author Brandon Bays says "Old school, market-driven materialism with its 'me first' myopia and its wanton excesses is archaic". The modern consumer needs a conscience. We should be prepared to pay more for Fair Trade food and clothing and less for exotic edible delicacies where animal cruelty is concerned. Collectively we can make a difference and it all starts with one word – No! In the words of Ghandi "be the change you wish to see in the world".

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