

Tour of duty

Want to shop with a conscience?
Michael Green learns how to check out the ethics of the checkout.

In a fluorescent-lit side room of the Footscray Baptist Church, a dozen people are plotting to change the world. They're going to start with their shopping habits. Already there are complications. "So you can't assume it's organic if it says organic?" asks Trudy, a community sector worker from Williamstown, looking perplexed.

"Definitely don't make that assumption," answers Nick Ray, the leader of today's ethical supermarket shopping tour, explaining that it's best to look for logos that show the product is "certified" organic. Gathered around Ray and his whiteboard, the audience nods and murmurs in agreement.

Ray, 37, looks bookish in his glasses, black T-shirt and slacks. Along with co-founder Clint Healy, he began the Ethical Consumer Group (ECG) in 2004, aiming to compile a broad product list that would help people shop in a way that reflects their values. "I'd found that people with their everyday purchases were actually endorsing the things that they were protesting against," he says.

Last year, Ray started running Shopping with a Conscience tours. Tonight, he begins with a pep talk. "We can make a huge difference. It's about empowering ourselves. It's about reclaiming choices. Food is what gives us life, so this is part of a bigger journey of getting back to understanding the things that sustain us."

Before braving the aisles, Ray holds a chat about the issues behind our shopping habits. Talk goes straight to the nitty-gritty: chocolate — alas, the news isn't good. One by one, each person brings up a new concern: food miles, fair trade, third world slavery, excess packaging, water wastage, overseas production.

There's a lot to keep in mind. To help bridge the information gap, ECG recently published the pocket-sized *Guide to Ethical Supermarket Shopping*. The guide, available on ECG's website (ethical.org.au), lists products in categories, from baking and cooking through to snacks. It rates the goods on environmental and social impact, treatment of animals and business practices.

Trudy, with her chin in her hand, is looking despondent. But Ray chimes in as gloom begins to take hold. "I hear you say, 'Oh my goodness, there are so many issues in one block of chocolate. How can I do this without being overwhelmed?'"

He offers a helping hand, in the form of five guiding principles to think about as you load your weekly basket (see box). Nods follow throughout the room. People are taking notes. Discussion continues and more concerns bubble to the surface: genetic engineering, embodied energy, home brand products. What is the right choice?

There are no absolute rights and wrongs, Ray says. Choices are all about priorities. For Alberta, a teacher from Geelong, priorities lie in social justice. "For me, fair trade is the most important," she says. A self-confessed "big chocolate fan", she has recently switched brands over concerns about one company's alleged unethical practices in developing countries.

The supermarkets agree that customer preferences have been changing. Coles

Nick Ray, who conducts ethical supermarket shopping tours.

PICTURES: REBECCA HALLAS



spokesman Jim Cooper says the chain's product mix reflects "increasing customer interest in products claiming environmental benefits, or products promoting ethical considerations". Woolworths, too, says it wants to meet customers' needs and, according to spokesman Benedict Brook, expects that its organic range "will expand in correspondence with demand and product availability".

With the pocket guides and calico bags in hand, it's finally time to go shopping. People shuffle to the bright lights of the Footscray Coles in four groups, each one charged with buying different supper goodies: drinks, breads and bickies, dips and toppings, and dessert.

The toppings team strikes trouble, unable to find a dip that fits their organic wish list. Meanwhile, the bickie trio struggle in their search for minimal packaging and appear trapped, wandering back and forth between aisles. The dessert squad opts for fruit salad in a bid to cut down on plastic.

The drinks buyers are first through the checkout, after choosing locally made thirst-quenchers. But distracted by their success, they momentarily forget about their bag and have to ask the attendant to take back the plastic one.

Together again after the expedition, each group explains their choices while the listeners munch on the newly gathered harvest. Seasonal fruit and vegies and Australian products were popular, but it was difficult to find organic options or information on genetically engineered ingredients.

When the food is finished, the tour party lingers to talk more, with satisfied stomachs and whirling heads. Katherine, a botanist from West Footscray, is upbeat about her new shopping duties. "The prioritised approach was the best thing about tonight. We're not living in a perfect world," she says.

Ray says he isn't trying to tell people what to do. "Everyone has wisdom and sharing it will be the thing that moves us forward over the hurdles, whether it be climate change or whether it be fair working conditions in other places." Everybody must take their own steps. "It's all about drawing a line in the sand, but making it your line."

The ECG runs Shopping with a Conscience tours on the last Thursday of the month. For more information, see ethical.org.au.

FIVE TIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE SHOPPING

Ask yourself: "Do I need it?" We often buy things we don't need. According to Nick Ray, of the Ethical Consumer Group, 80% of consumable products end up in the bin within six months.

Remember: Every choice makes a difference. You may be only one of 6.7 billion people on the Earth, but your decisions count. Your dollar is your vote.

Don't be overwhelmed. Learn about the issues behind your shopping, but take on just one issue at a time.

Go for the best buy. You won't find the right product all of the time. Choose as best you can, based on your values and availability.

Make new habits. Once you learn about a product, put your decision into action every time. Give feedback to the shop or manufacturer — let them know what you want.

Source: Adapted from *The Guide to Ethical Supermarket Shopping*

