

Buyer alert: authors deliver advice on guilt-free supermarket shopping

Two writers with a conscience are making it easier to buy according to your beliefs, writes **Daniella Miletic**.

PROTESTING at the World Economic Forum outside Melbourne's Crown Casino in 2000, Nick Ray saw a woman wearing a T-shirt with a question printed on it that would change his life. On the same day, his future business partner, whom he had not yet met, Clint Healy, also noticed the woman's top and had a strong response to what was written on it.

The T-shirt read: "Your dollar is your vote. Who did you vote for today?"

The words made Ray think about how the everyday items he buys could be a way of voting for the values he believes in and supporting the companies that promote them.

He started researching the grocery items on supermarket shelves across the nation and investigating the backgrounds of the companies that produce them.

Did the companies have a good track record? Had any groups — here or overseas — boycotted any of their products? Did they test on animals? Were the goods made in Australia? Are they organic or genetically engineered? How many food

miles have they clocked up? These were some of the questions Ray set out to discover. "I saw often that I would be standing for one thing, in terms of my words and my actions ... and at the same time my purchases were actually endorsing some of the practices I was against," Ray says.

Healy, 39, was also asking some of the same questions.

He started writing a draft of a guide that would offer consumers information about products sold in supermarkets.

"I basically took it on, not because I wanted to do it, but because it needed to be done," Healy says. "I could see that Australia needed something like this and we didn't have one."

After meeting each other four years after the protest, through an environmental group, the pair found they had been working on similar projects and decided to set up their own not-for-profit association, The Ethical Consumer Group.

Last year they published 10,000 copies of their first booklet, *The Guide to Ethical Supermarket Shopping*. They have published 25,000 updated

Product type **Industry alert**
Indicates concerns about an entire industry

BRAND	COMPANY	Country of origin
TOILET PAPER Native forest logging (choose recycled)		
Cottonsoft, Naturelle ★, Quliton, Softly	ABC Tissue Products	AU ✓
Ecosoft ★	E Sime and Co	NZL ~
Purex, Sorbent	SCA	SWL ✓
Bauquets, Envirosoft ★, Merino, Safe ★, Tree Free ★	Encore Tissue	AU ~
Paseo	Asia Pulp and Paper	SGP ~
Delsey, Kleenex, Wonder Soft	Kimberley-Clark	USA

Brand names ★ Indicates Australian ownership and outstanding features

Parent and related companies

Country of origin

ICON DECODER

- ✓ BETTER BUY
PRAISES, NO CRITICISMS
- ~ NO INFORMATION
NO PRAISES, NO CRITICISMS
- ✗ AVOID WHERE POSSIBLE
CRITICISMS
- BOYCOTT CALL
CONTINUED ONGOING
INTERNATIONAL CRITICISM
- AUSTRALIAN OWNED
- ★ OUTSTANDING PRODUCT
- INDUSTRY ALERT

* Recycled content

versions this year and it is being sold for \$5 in newsagents.

The booklet contains a product list ranging from bread to deodorant. Beside the product are icons that indicate whether the company behind the item has been praised or is clouded with criticism.

An "x" next to a product tells shoppers to avoid buying it when possible.

A circle with a line through it warns that a company has been

boycotted by an organisation. A map of Australia shows whether it is Australian owned, and a star suggests it is an outstanding product.

Ray, 38, believes Australians are craving the "tools" that will allow them to make informed choices when shopping. "Slowly, your shopping basket becomes your own," Ray says. "You have actually got some ownership, you have taken responsibility for the choices, and so it is a bit

of a process of going from being a passive consumer to a consumer that is actually really involved."

Also on offer is a "Shopping with a Conscience" supermarket tour on the last Thursday of every month. The tour begins with a discussion about ethics in supermarket shopping, followed by a supermarket visit in which participants split up and buy goods based on their own values, and then ends with a



Clint Healy (left) and Nick Ray scour supermarket shelves as part of their research for an ethical shopping guide. PICTURE: NIC GIBSON

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NICK RAY, author

dinner prepared with the products.

Last week, Halina Campbell, 23, saw a flyer for the tour and decided to do it. She had always been interested in the origin of products in supermarkets and wanted to shop according to her own values. "Obviously shopping ethically is an overwhelming task and you don't really know where to start," she says. "But I guess it comes down to your values and what you are

looking for when you are shopping."

Ms Campbell, of Ascot Vale, says her main consideration is food miles. "I have learnt practical things like looking at the pieces of paper next to fruit to see where it has come from, so you can see how far they have travelled."

As well as food miles, a major focus of the guide is company track records and the record of parent companies. So far, Ray

and Healy have not received a threatening letter from any company.

Ethical shopping is gaining momentum in Australia.

This week, the Australian Association of National Advertisers agreed to implement an environmental claims code in response to consumers becoming more aware.

Dr Sean Sands, a consumer researcher at the Centre for Retail Studies, is not surprised more consumers are getting interested. But he is unsure whether a renewed focus on price in tougher economic times will have an impact.

"One argument is that people are more focused on value, and the issue of green or sustainable retailing is kind of becoming a secondary concern," Dr Sands says. "I guess it is too soon to say exactly if this is the case."

Ray believes any noticeable impact will take time.

Healy agrees: "I think it is gaining momentum quite quickly and awareness is a lot higher than what it was five years ago, however, there is still a long way to go and a hell of a lot of ignorant shoppers out there."

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www.ethical.org.au