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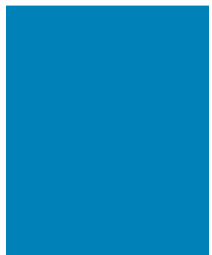
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Mark Dolliver's Takes: Mixed Blessings

January 27, 2003

By Mark Dolliver

If the word "luxury" brings to mind a money-is-no-object attitude, think again. A study focused on people with household income over \$100,000 finds them keen for bargains, even when buying the unnecessary of life. Conducted by Unity Marketing, the study identified the luxury product categories in which affluent consumers are likeliest to make purchases. Electronics led the roster, with 51 percent of respondents having bought luxuries of this ilk in the past year. Also high on the list were garden-related wares (45 percent), fragrances/beauty products (44 percent), apparel/accessories (41 percent), furniture/floor coverings(35 percent) and linens/bedding (34 percent). Farther down the list were cars (24 percent), art/antiques (19 percent), tabletop items and recreational vehicles (8 percent each). In all but one of the 14 categories covered in the study, the majority of respondents reported making their most recent purchase "on sale or at a discount." (Fragrances/beauty goods were the exception.) "An expectation of discounting has been fostered in the luxury-goods arena," the report notes. Still, folks in the high-income households managed to shell out an average of \$12,300 on luxuries during the past year.

Companies that advertise on television ought to subsidize the Internet. After all, spam now provokes so much consumer hostility that TV spots seem innocuous by comparison. In a Harris Poll, 80 percent of wired adults said they find spam very annoying—up from 49 percent in a 2000 poll. Three-fourths favor a ban on mass spamming. The categories that irk the most people: pornography (cited by 91 percent), mortgages/loans (79 percent), investments (68 percent) and real estate (61 percent).

It's one of the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population. Thus, it stands to reason that enterprising marketers are targeting overweight Americans. Time last week devoted a four-page article to ways in which companies now cater to the special needs of "XXXL Americans." Automakers are adjusting to new realities by making the seats wider in some models and by offering seat-belt extenders. Makers of chairs for home and office are also offering extra-wide models, at premium prices. Other items mentioned in the article range from longer shoe horns (for people who can't reach their feet) to plus-size dolls to specialized hospital gear. The fact that Time gave the topic so much play is a sign of how norms are shifting to reflect the rise in

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average weights.

This doesn't exactly mean pizza is dietetic. But an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association does single it out as one of the rare foods whose average serving sizes haven't grown in the past 20 years. By contrast, the typical serving of salty snacks rose from 1.0 to 1.6 ounces between 1977 and 1996; the average soft-drink serving grew from 13.1 to 19.9 fluid ounces; a hamburger grew from 5.7 to 7.0 ounces; and a serving of fries increased from 3.1 to 3.6 ounces. While fast-food chains are often criticized for foisting mega-portions on their patrons, the researchers wrote that "the most surprising result is the large portion size increases for food consumed at home."

Why be president if you can be a star instead? That's the attitude, evidently, of teenagers responding to the 2003 Lemelson-MIT Invention Index survey. Teens were asked to say which they'd like to be when they get older—a famous inventor, a famous athlete, a famous musician, a famous actor/actress or president of the U.S. The boys' choices: athlete (42 percent), inventor (19 percent), actor (18 percent), musician (16 percent) and president (13 percent). The girls' picks: actress (32 percent), musician (24 percent), athlete (22 percent), president (17 percent) and inventor (10 percent). The totals exceed 100 percent because some eager respondents made more than one pick.

In bygone days, canning and freezing enabled Americans to eat unpickled vegetables all year round. Now, they can insist on the fresh stuff. The chart below excerpts a survey by ORC International. There's some regional variation. People in the West have an above-average propensity for fresh vegetables (65 percent); Midwesterners are the most likely to make do with canned (26 percent).

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