

*"It was food composition labeling that gave us clear information and allows us to make better choices."*



# Enter Sandman

Consumed by consumption

The movie *Logan's Run* (1976) takes place in a post-apocalyptic world that may have been ruined by an ecological disaster. A domed city is all that remains. The population numbers and consumption in the city are closely controlled. At age 30 a person's life clock, installed in their hand at birth, flashes red signaling that they must submit to a renewal ceremony, which in fact turns out to be their demise. Some try to escape but these *runners* are pursued by policeman called *sandmen*.

Pathologically, the word consumption refers to progressive wasting of the body. The irony of course is that we are pathological consumers and what is wasting away is the world we are consuming.

Despite our best efforts Statistics Canada tells that our waste generation rate continues to increase (eight per cent between 2004 and 2006). The increase in waste generation on a per capita basis is not inconsequential at 6 per cent. This data is troubling.

We don't seem to be making a tangible dent in the amount of waste going to landfill. While we may have made that connection between consumption and waste in a residential context — mostly because we have to personally handle the wastes — we clearly do not have that connection in our working lives. On the business side, which is responsible for more than 60 per cent of waste generation, it is always about the bottom line, which of course makes sense, although there appears to be an ongoing reluctance to take steps to reduce over consumption that is manifest as waste. Ultimately we are all the same people whether we are at home or at work — but we do not make the same connection with the environment.

I've been hearing for at least the last twenty years hear that we are a consumer society and that this needs to change. We have not changed over the last 20 years and if anything we have gotten a lot worse. We talk a lot and act a little, but not nearly enough.

Our lives are defined by convenience and the next thing we are going to buy, which is synonymous with having access to everything we want at the exact time we want it. This has led to hyper-consumerism and an addiction in comparison with which our oil addiction pales.

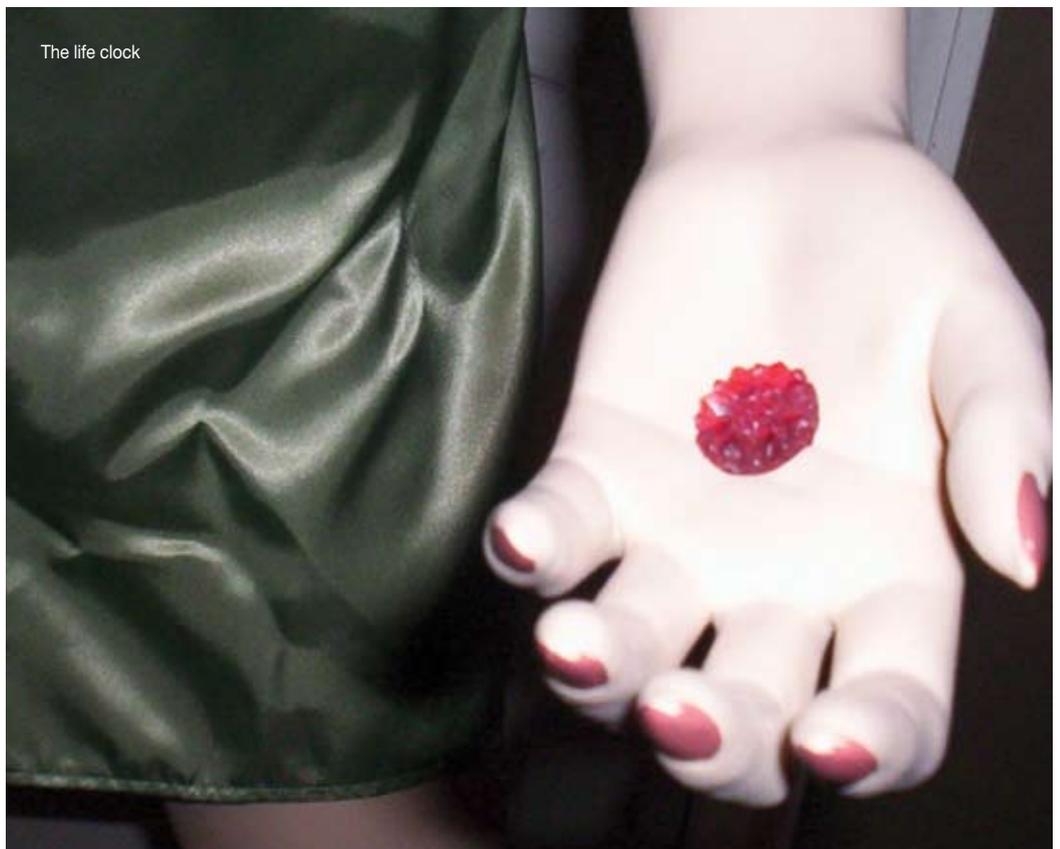
A great example of this and a nexus of this issue is our holiday season, in December. It's quite instructional when we see so much emphasis placed on retail sales, with statistics sliced and diced to a fine porridge. Are people spending? How much

more did they spend relative to last year? The pundits have their crystal balls in hand telling us our future based on and gauged by the success of our economy in terms of many Christmas presents we bought.

As a society we're too many years removed from truly bad times when consumption was based on what we really need rather than what we want. My parents would argue that my generation is too wasteful and it's pretty clear that the younger generation is not doing any better. Terms like childhood obesity and gastric bypass surgery paint a clear picture. Living through a war, as my parents did, gives you a more profound appreciation of consumption. When consumption is geared to meeting life's basic needs and not always successfully, your outlook on life moving forward helps you to temper your consumption. This kind of ethos has to filter down into how we build buildings, move about, and sell or buy goods.

### Solutions

I can think of two things we can do to move forward — one for today and one for tomorrow. We need to engage in what I like to call "smart consumption." This is a thought process where we think about the environmental impacts of our purchases in three distinct stages:



## COMPOSTING MATTERS

1. What is the environmental impact of making this product?
2. What is the environmental impact of using this product? and
3. What is the environmental impact after this product has lost its usefulness?

The smart consumption approach is an intuitive and qualitative thought process to monitor and refine our consumption. It's meant to force us to step back and really think about what we're doing.

One of the challenges is that people do not always understand the environmental impact of their consumption because it's complicated. It's for this reason that well intentioned people cling to icons of consumption like plastic bags, and now plastic water bottles. And while they may not be quite as environmentally problematic as some make them out to be, I believe this

thinking can be leveraged to tackle consumption in general. They signal a fundamental change in attitude that has and will continue to result in changes just like similar changes in attitudes about pesticides has shifted behavior.

Ultimately we will need to have a more quantitative approach to help guide our consumption. We need to be able to distill the outcomes of life-cycle assessments — the process that helps us measure environmental impacts.

We know intuitively that certain foods are bad for us but it was food composition labeling (e.g., per-cent fat, etc.) that gave us clear information and allows us to make better choices. Eventually some kind of environmental labeling of products will be necessary to help consumers make sound decisions about the goods they purchase and consume at work and

at home. I have no idea what it will look like but ultimately it'll have to be something easily discernable.

Not that movies are the harbinger of anything, but it's interesting to note that the recent movie *The Happening* has the earth rebelling against its inhabitants by releasing fatal neurotoxins from trees. The remake of *Logans Run*, slated for 2010, has a person's *life clock* flash at age 21 rather than 30. We clearly have become gloomier about our long-term prospects on earth. We can't run from this. Rather we need to redefine and refocus our efforts to more smartly consume. ♻️

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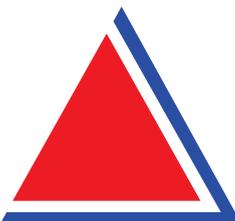
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