

Deeper Shade of Green

By Holly Barbo



The Meaning of Value

We need to reeducate, or perhaps remind, our consumers and our industry that there is a difference between “value” and “bargain.”

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Holly Barbo is the owner/partner of Barbo Furniture, a Bellingham, Wash., retailer. The company also has a manufacturing arm and has always focused on sustainable practices and products. She can be reached at hollywye@gmail.com.

The world is round. I know that’s not a news flash but sometimes we lose sight that this is a physical fact as well as a geo/political/environmental truth. Forget the nonsense about it being flat. The round model still works best to understand what is happening “around” us.

No country in history has emerged as a major industrial power without damaging the environment. The fact that China’s meteoric rise as an economic power has no parallel in history coincides with its record-shattering pollution problems. China’s paying a horrendous price. It’s seen an increase in death rates from pollution-related illnesses like cancer and cholera. Chinese coastlines are swamped by red tide algae growth. Waterways are fouled by chemical, organic and thermal waste. Soil is polluted and becoming infertile. To address that problem, fertilizer use is drastically up, adding to water pollution. The nation’s literally choking on its economic success.

The Chinese are making some efforts to slow the damage, such as using a low-grade coal to generate power to using liquified coal, which is cleaner. There is so much more that needs to be done. While they are trying to rein in the damage, the economy continues to grow in double digits.

The problem is bigger than that one nation. Acid rain is coming down in China, but also in Korea and Japan. The dust and soot clouds, laced with arsenic, lead and zinc, have traveled over Hawaii and our west coast, sprinkling down particulates where I, and millions of others, live.

Did we totally cause this environmental mess in China as some Chinese have claimed? No, I don’t believe we can honestly say we are the only cause. But we’ve definitely contributed. Could the Chinese have put in safeguards and regulations? Yes. Hindsight aside, by demanding goods with ever-lower prices, we must shoulder part of the blame. We have, under market pressure, moved factories there and done everything to cut costs for bargain-hungry consumers. Now there’s a problem. We’re part of this tragedy. We’re all culpable: manufacturers, retailers and consumers.

To start, we need to reeducate, or perhaps remind, our consumers and our industry that there is a difference between “value” and “bargain.”

“Value” is getting an item made of quality material with excellent craftsmanship that will last a lifetime for a fair price. “Bargain” is getting something for less money. Quality doesn’t enter into the equation—the look and the sustainability aren’t the same. There’s no free lunch. We need to get realistic about the true cost of goods. If we don’t learn or teach this lesson, the China tragedy will move to every other third-world place as that country provides cheap labor to feed our hunger for bargains.

In my store, 85 percent of all furniture is made in the Americas, and 15 percent in Asia (I counted), yet all my furniture is well-made and sustainable. This is “value” furniture, and that’s the conversation I have with my customers. But I back up my statement with facts. I know how that piece is made! No greenwashing here! I show them the manufacturers’ books. Education is the key to all of this, and each of us need to improve our knowledge. I’m having classes for customers. I’ll take any question, and if I don’t know the answer, I’ll find out and get back to that individual. Total transparency goes with education. Our decisions will affect our own future and our children’s future, quite possibly for generations. There is “value” in a thoughtful choice—and our choices have power. **HFB**