



The Invisible Badge

MOVING PAST CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Rob Walker

What comes after conspicuous consumption?

Thorstein Veblen introduced the idea of “conspicuous consumption” in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, in 1899. And it’s still being recycled today. Veblen gave examples like the man who parades down Main Street in “stainless” linen, with a superfluous walking stick. These objects supposedly told a story—“evidence of leisure”—to an audience of strangers.

Today’s consumer is supposed to be a little more sophisticated than that. So it’s puzzling how many marketers still talk about how a certain beer or sneaker or handbag functions as a so-called “badge.” Even hybrid cars are said to be eco-status markers that show “conspicuous concern” about the environment. More scholarly observers call this “signaling.” But, in the end, it’s all repackaged Veblen: The idea is that we buy stuff mostly to impress other people.

Perhaps this was true in the past. But the time has come to retire the conspicuous consumption idea. Observers of consumer culture (marketers, to name an example) need to understand that, as a concept, it’s inadequate. The rest of us (consumers, that is) need to understand that even if we wanted it to work, it just doesn’t anymore.

There is a better idea—the invisible badge.

Let's start by breaking down a single example of how a particular purchase illuminates the consumer mind. The Viking Range Corporation happens to be a frequently cited example of the sort of thing that satisfies the 21st century consumer. Its story has been told often: The company made available professional-quality stoves to everyday people (or at least to those who could afford them; they cost about \$4,000) and built a \$400 million business. What is it, then, about the Viking range?

When *Consumer Reports* evaluated more than 50 ranges a few years ago, Viking's products got a "very good" rating—but so did a whole slew of other ranges. Viking was not picked as a "best buy," even in the high-end category. It hardly matters: Viking is *the* top-end range brand. The company even attracts Viking pilgrims to a special cooking demonstration center at its Greenwood, Mississippi, headquarters.

In their book *Trading Up*, about the "better-educated, more sophisticated," and "more discerning" modern consumer, Michael J. Silverstein and Neil Fiske explain that buyers of Viking Range products are expressing their "Individual Style" as well as their interest in adventurous seeking of new experiences—presumably culinary ones, in this case. Then they add this observation: "Some 75 percent of Viking cooktops installed are never used."

Clearly, there's something like cognitive dissonance involved in proudly owning an object that expresses your interest in fine cooking—and not cooking with it.

Sounds like a case of conspicuous consumption, right? Just the sort of example cultural critics seize on to argue about what is wrong with contemporary consumers. Virginia Postrel, in her book *The Substance of Style*, correctly summarizes that familiar critique concisely: “It’s all about status.” That is, these critics say we glom on to symbols and objects as a means of impressing—or even competing with—an audience of strangers. It’s a never-ending game of “status-oriented oneupmanship,” in which we “just want to stand out, or at least not look bad, compared to other people,” Postrel wrote.

She countered that this theory—that people spend thousands on restaurant-quality kitchen stoves merely to out-status their neighbors—is simple-minded. Her counter-theory: Even seldom-used Viking stoves offer an aesthetic reward. In other words, this is a case of an economically rational consumer acquiring utility in the form of pleasure.

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I suspect there are more economically rational ways to acquire thousands of dollars’ worth of aesthetic pleasure. But, I think Postrel has a point about the inadequacy of status-seeking as an all-purpose explanation for consumer behavior that seems illogical to third-party observers. A Viking range, after all, is not an elaborately carved walking stick used on a busy promenade. The only thing less plausible than paying a premium for cooking range simply to enjoy its good looks is to do so because you think that any more than a tiny handful of people will ever see, notice, and be impressed by your purchase.

Is there some third possible explanation?

I think the answer is a kind of combination of the two. I think it is true that at least some (and perhaps a lot) of what we buy is on some level a function of stories we're telling our about our selves—like, “I am the kind of person who cooks on a restaurant-quality stove, I have Individual Style, I appreciate fine aesthetics in all objects,” etc.

But the key is that strangers on the promenade, or even neighbors visiting your kitchen, are not the real audience for that story. What the Joneses might think is, really, beside the point. Because what you are really doing is telling that story *to yourself*.

In other words, yes, a fancy, uncooked-on stove really is a badge in the sense that it's a symbolic confirmation or expression of identity (an identity that we may wish for rather than actually embody—aspirational rather than authentic). But the fact that hardly anyone sees it, let alone accepts the meaning it supposedly projects, hardly matters. In fact, if the real audience is us, the badge may as well be invisible.

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Still, we do have our promenades in the 21st century, and if you look around the next time you're on one—from a mall to a crowded urban street—you'll surely notice plenty of badges, in the form of, for instance, logos. From the Ecko sweatshirt to limited-edition Nike sneakers to the latest high-fashion It Bag to the eco-conscious “This Is Not A Plastic Bag” tote, symbols project identity all around us. But even here, conspicuous consumption has faded as a useful explanation for what's really going on.

In his book about luxury, *Living It Up*, scholar James Twitchell compared the effect of certain rarefied, high-end brands with a dog whistle. As an example, he pointed to the various sorts of logo treatments on a Prada bag. A bag with a small logo would likely be more expensive than one with a big logo—and one with no logo whatsoever would be the most expensive of all: Only true cognoscenti would “hear” it. “This was connoisseurship applied to consumption,” he wrote.

During the course of reporting my book *Buying In*—which deals with the intersection of personal narrative and consumer behavior in some detail—I had many interesting conversations with young creators of a newer generation of brands (I call it the “brand underground”) that take Twitchell's dog whistle idea into a new realm.

These brands—like Barking Irons, or The Hundreds—may be unfamiliar to you if not are a participating in the subcultures they are part of. But they do communicate participation in a subculture, and in a way that has a lot more in common with Twitchell's dog whistle than with, say, the aggressively flamboyant regalia of punk: As in the luxury arena, you need the proper background to understand what you were seeing. To everyone else—underground arrivistes, Twitchell might say—the brand symbols mean nothing and probably don't even register. Brand underground badges are, in effect, invisible.

And this is not a failure; it is the goal. It suggests a tighter relationship between the brand producer and the brand consumer, and speaks more directly to that most crucial relationship: the relationship between the consumer and consumed.

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And the truth is, Main Street today is a much more confusing place than ever before, crowded with niche consumer tribes. Some see status in sneakers, others in handbags, still others in eco-chic stuff—and, who knows, maybe some see it in fancy walking sticks.

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Point is, there's not much consensus. Even a leading fashion expert recently confessed to a reporter that he couldn't remember the last time he saw someone on the street and thought, "Oh, you're hopelessly out of style."

"Everything is equal," is how he summed it up. When a top trend tracker concludes that keeping up with the Joneses is a waste of time, it's probably time to admit that the whole concept just doesn't work anymore. That doesn't mean you can't be proud of your hybrid or limited edition kicks or the latest It Bag.

Just don't expect strangers to be impressed.

The message of the invisible badge, however, is not futility.

It's possibility.

Really getting who the audience is you're trying to impress and tell your story to—you—is freeing. It redefines what a status signal, or a badge, can be.

Consider an example even more well-known than Viking ranges: Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. As the author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold more than twenty-five million copies and is said to be the best-selling hardcover book ever, Warren is a figure whose thinking has been emphatically ratified in the marketplace. Indeed, the commercial persuasion industry has responded to his thinking largely by ransacking it for ideas. Following his success (and the success of the movie *The Passion of the Christ* and various other cultural hits in the "Christian market"), marketers have grown increasingly fond of throwing around terms like "customer evangelist," or arguing that "brands are belief systems," or attempting to adopt the "lessons" of organized religion to the consumer marketplace.

What makes that response so misguided is that it gives short shrift to Warren's actual message. You can take or leave the belief system that Rick Warren is pushing, but you have to concede it really *is* a belief system. In fact, it's a belief system that calls on people—and gets people—to tithe and volunteer, to sacrifice money and time for the benefit of others who aren't even participants in it. While he has advanced a critique of contemporary culture as overly individualistic and materialistic, part of the key to his success has been an ability to offer an alternative.

Perhaps the fundamental tension of modern life—and thus a thing we seek an answer to, whether consciously or not, in the badges of the consumer marketplace—is the challenge of feeling like both an individual and part of something bigger than ourselves. As Malcolm Gladwell documented in *The New Yorker*, Saddleback has been remarkably effective in resolving that tension: Not just in drawing in thousands of people, but in deploying a "small group" model that connects members in "cells" of half a dozen people or so, "who meet in one another's homes during the week to worship and pray."

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Warren has called these cells “affinity groups,” describing how “large-group celebrations”—like worship services in arena-size churches—“give people the feeling that they are a part of something significant,” but they’re also impersonal. “The small affinity groups, on the other hand, are perfect for creating a sense of intimacy and close fellowship. It’s there that everybody knows your name. When you are absent, people notice. You are missed if you don’t show up.” Even Robert Putnam, the *Bowling Alone* author who has taken a dim view of watered-down notions of community building, has praised Warren’s achievement.

In fairness to those marketers who raid Rick Warren’s success story for sales tips, plenty of religious thinkers think Warren and others like him are too influenced by the tactics and strategies of Madison Avenue. On half a dozen occasions, *The Purpose Driven Life* mentions ancillary products like “the Purpose-Driven Life Journal” and “the Purpose-Driven Life Scripture Keeper Plus,” and the appendix lists more, including a twelve-song CD.

But the Purpose-Driven products are material objects ginned up to reflect a belief system—not the other way around. Participants in a belief system finding material ways to express their connection to it is something quite different from trying to *extract* a belief system from the mere fact that a lot of people have bought a particular sort of car or MP3 player. Again, you can take or leave Warren’s belief system, but it isn’t successful because Saddleback sells cool “badges,” as modern-day marketers might put it. It’s successful because participation is its own reward.

If there's a badge involved, it's internal—an invisible badge.

That is just one example. A quite different (and secular) one was articulated not long ago by Michael Pollan in an essay for *The New York Times Magazine* in which he addressed the awesome challenges of climate change, and wondered what, really, a single individual can really do about it.

“Going personally green is a bet, nothing more or less,” he acknowledged, “though it’s one we probably all should make, even if the odds of it paying off aren’t great.” He cited as inspiration brave figures in Communist Czechoslovakia and Poland, such as Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik, who made a similar bet, choosing to live “as if” they were in a free society, an act of will—and a bet—that paid off mightily in time as their examples spread and the world changed.

“Sometimes you have to act as if acting will make a difference, even when you can’t prove that it will,” Pollan wrote. Then he asked what a “comparable bet” for the individual confronting climate change might be, and suggested this:

“The idea is to find one thing to do in your life that doesn’t involve spending or voting, that may or may not virally rock the world but is real and particular (as well as symbolic) and that, come what may, will offer its own rewards. Maybe you decide to give up meat, an act that would reduce your carbon footprint by as much as a quarter. Or you could try this: determine to observe the Sabbath. For one day a week, abstain completely from economic activity: no shopping, no driving, no electronics.”

These notions—each turning on finding a thing to do that does not involve merely buying something, but that has value both real and symbolic—these notions are what the invisible badge is all about.

Each also points directly to the problem with real-world badges of most modern marketing and branding, and why their time has passed (or should). They confuse the expression of self with the expression of aspiration—or, at worst, of mere wishful thinking or pure delusion. It’s easy to buy

a fancy stove and think you're expressing Individual Style when in fact you're doing no such thing. It's easy to acquire a fake badge.

The framework of the invisible badge is wholly different. It can only be a reflection of who you really are. It can't be faked. The invisible badge need not derive from religion or environmental consciousness. Your belief system can be drawn from membership in a subculture, or the military, or any number of other sources. Possibly that belonging manifests itself in a tangible, badge-ish way—an old Misfits T-shirt, or a patch signifying service in the 3rd Infantry Division of the United States Army.

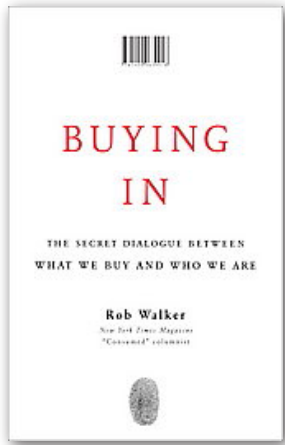
But (and this is crucial) even absent the visual signifier, the identity, and its meaning, remain.

It doesn't matter who else can "see" who you are.

What matters is that *you* know.

So there's the key.

And a good reason, perhaps, to ask yourself: What is YOUR invisible badge? 📌



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Rob Walker is the author of *Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are*, published in June 2008 by Random House. He writes the weekly column "Consumed," a blend of business journalism and cultural anthropology, for *The New York Times Magazine*. Previously, he created and wrote the popular "Ad Report Card" column for *Slate*, and he has contributed to a wide range of publications and media outlets, from public-radio program *Marketplace* to *Fast Company*, from *The New Republic* to *AdBusters*. Walker continues to write about the secret dialogue between what we buy and who we are at his own website, [Murketing.com](#). He lives in Savannah, Georgia, with his wife, photographer Ellen Susan.

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