

# KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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# CONSUMER CRAP

## *and why it happens*

By GLENN CAMPBELL

Have you ever bought something pretty or appealing that fell apart after the first use? If so, you've been victimized by consumer crap. It's all around us: products that look attractive but fail to fulfill their intended purpose. Crap permeates every niche of modern life, from crap consumer products and crap food to crap entertainment and crappy advice from so-called experts.

It's hard to blame Wal-Mart, Hollywood or Frito-Lay for the crap explosion. They will argue, correctly, that they are only giving people what they want. If you give the average consumer the choice of two products—the simple, cheap, basic one that does the job and the fancy, expensive and overdesigned one that doesn't—he will usually choose the crappy one whenever he can afford it. Such products also provide a bigger profit margin to the seller, so what's the point in offering anything else?

Crap, in fact, is a universal human problem that has been with us since the beginning of time. Whenever humans have excess resources at their disposal, crap will arise to absorb them.

Crap is a by-product of the human perceptual system. It works like this: Humans have needs—for food, safety, reproduction, etc. To serve those needs, they develop an affinity for sensory clues that have supplied those needs in the past. However, as soon as such a system arises, opportunists step in to provide those sensations without serving the underlying need.

A simple example is the human taste for sugar, fat and salt. These were rare commodities at the time when our species evolved, so we have developed a biological attraction to them. Crap producers serve these impulses by giving us nothing but sugar, fat and salt—exactly what we crave—without supplying the nutrition we really need.

A product that gives us what we truly need is one of “quality.” Quality products tend to lack an advertizing budget, so they're not so easy to see. The profit margin is low, so retailers aren't eager to sell them. Quality products aren't usually pretty and they might not stimulate our senses, so they probably won't be the first item we choose. We learn about quality by trial and error, usually after being burned by crap a few times.

After consuming too much crap with little satisfaction, people eventually get more discriminating. They begin to see the defects in their initial selection criteria, so they try different ones. They know they want quality, so they start deliberately searching for it.

How do marketers respond? They redesign the packaging of their crap and put the word “Quality” on it. Maybe they even raise the price, because people searching for quality tend to believe it should cost more. In other words, whatever new senses you develop in the search for quality, crap producers will eventually detect them, pander to them and still fail to fill your needs.

The never-ending arms race between quality and crap could be seen as the central conflict of human existence.

We're always searching for quality—that which actually serves our needs—and although we may find it for a while, crap eventually sneaks in to take it away from us, and we have to search again.

We want quality relationships, not crappy ones. We want a quality lifestyle, quality health and a quality belief system, so we search for these things using the surface sensations we associate with success. Unfortunately, these clues aren't the same as experience, and they often lead us astray.

For example, a typical defect of one's first romance is that it provides all the public symbols of a successful relationship but not the substance. Having never engaged in such an enterprise before, we obviously don't have the experience to identify quality and defeat crap, so this first foray is probably destined to crash. Next time, however, we might do better because now we know what to look for.

What matters to quality is actual operation, not appearance. To adequately test any product, you have to try it out in realistic conditions—or at least get some unbiased reviews from people who have used it. If you rely on surface clues alone, you are always vulnerable to crap.

One must be a cautious consumer, reluctant to commit but also willing to experiment. Every selection method is potentially flawed, so you have to allow yourself the freedom to fail.

—G.C.

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