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CAN I SWITCH SHOPPING FOR SWAPPING?

Thursday March 17, 2011

Fiona Webster

It couldn't have been a more complicated week to ditch the cash, car and every other convenience that makes my life run smoothly. I had to attend a friend's birthday party that required a new outfit plus present and bottle of wine to take, my daughter and I had dentist's appointments (five miles away) and my student son, who eats for Britain, was coming home for the weekend.

All of these would demand generous flexing of my credit cards... or would they? No, says Rachel Botsman, co-author of *What's Mine Is Yours*. The solution is "collaborative consumption" or "sharing" to put it in simpler terms.

"Ninety per cent of what we own is used less than once a month," she says. "The average power drill is used for a total of 15 minutes in its lifetime."

She has a point. We are the consume-and-clutter generation. Look at your home and compare it to those of the Fifties. Mine is full of stuff we never touch. In the end it starts to take over and the things you own end up owning you.

It doesn't even make us happy, says Rachel. Research shows that those who can afford to buy more material things than most are no more satisfied for it.

Rachel's ideas are clearly catching. Bike sharing is the fastest-growing form of transport in the world. As landfill sites overflow and rubbish piles up, it makes sense to share what we have rather than buy new and chuck away.

So where to start? As my sceptical other half Carson watched me with his eyebrows raised, I logged on to my local Freecycle group and stuck a toe in the water. At first I thought you literally swapped goods. What would I get for that old fridge in my garage?

I soon learned it's a more altruistic process. You put an item you don't want on your local Freecycle site with the aim of giving it away.

You can also look for items you want although site etiquette suggests you donate first before getting something for yourself.

As soon as I posted my fridge I received several emails expressing interest but my rural location put most off. Finally, a young couple new to the area arrived, picked it up and sent me a thank-you email, which gave me a satisfied glow.

It made more space in the garage too but that didn't solve my problem of finding a birthday gift for a friend. Back on Freecycle I soon spotted a painting, part of an attic clearance, that sounded perfect. When I went to pick it up, the painting's owner even offered to make me a cup of tea.

I also needed to take a bottle of wine to the party. Normally I swing by Tesco but not this week. My friend Linda, who runs a company that teaches people about wine (explorewine.co.uk), came up with a solution.

If I would help her with some suggestions for promoting National Wine Month in May she'd give me a few bottles in return. Job done. The wine she gave me was lovely and I had enough to take to the party with some left over.

I'd planned to buy a new outfit for the party but, of course, hitting the high street was out. So I clicked on to a site that explains "swishing" (where you and your friends get together to swap or sell your unwanted clothes, maybe "bargains" you'd hoped to slim into or presents that aren't quite you).

My friends were sceptical at first but turned up with armfuls of lovely clothes, some never worn. I poured them a glass of Linda's wine and soon we were swapping like mad.

I came away with three new outfits including a lovely peachy party dress. It also made me look at my own wardrobe in a new light and realise there was some nice stuff in there. Several good-quality shirts came to life after I freshened them up with a wash and iron.

When I told a neighbour with an allotment and greenhouse about my swap week he gave me armfuls of cabbages, cauliflowers, parsnips, potatoes, tomatoes and sprouts.

Then a farmer friend swapped me a pheasant for Sunday lunch in return for help with a horse on his land. Carson and the children were horrified when I suggested they cleaned and prepared the pheasant and OK, we had to get the farmer over to help with that bit but they loved the casserole