

Winning Over the Anti-Consumer – How to Sell when People won't Buy

By Anes Motam

What if the next big thing... was buying nothing at all? In a marketplace saturated with choice and dominated by convenience, an unlikely movement is gaining ground and shifting the cultural conversation. Across TikTok, YouTube and Instagram, a growing wave of consumers are embracing trends like "No Buy 2025" and "Underconsumption Core", posing a fresh challenge for marketers worldwide. In this new landscape, customers are more selective with their wallets and resistant to traditional marketing. Only brands that offer real value and engage customers through authentic, organic interactions will thrive.

A Brief History of Anti-Consumerism

Anti-consumerism is a relatively new word used to describe an ancient phenomenon. An argument could be made that the central themes of anti-consumerism – the resistance to temptation and excess – can be found in biblical passages and perhaps even earlier. According to [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#), the first mentions of 'anti-consumerism' appear in the mid-20th century, coinciding with the rise of mass media, and the wave of social and academic critiques of its influence. The hippie movement was also gaining ground around that time, representing a countercultural push against the proliferation of consumer goods and materialism, emphasising instead values like peace, communal living and environmentalism.

To understand the trend's underlying behavioural drivers, it's important to delineate between thrifty spending habits and anti-consumerism. Frugal spending is driven by the general phenomena of weak economic growth and rising cost of living squeezing many households around the world. On the other hand, the anti-consumer's motives are less financial and more political, social or self-fulfilling in nature – often a protest against big marketing's push to get you to scroll more, click more and ultimately buy more. This manifests in different ways, from customers choosing to '[shop their closet](#)', to scouring second-hand markets for new outfits or even in online trends such as "[Project Pan](#)" - a challenge encouraging users to finish existing beauty products before buying new ones. As brands adapt to evolving customer needs, many principles will resonate with both

frugal and value-driven consumers due to their shared behaviours.



Popularity score for Google searches of “No Buy 2025”. Numbers on the vertical axis represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term.

From TikTok Trends to Long-Term Shifts

The idea that consumerism has become a leviathan too big to stop itself from devouring everything in its path has influenced a cornucopia of groups and ideas across the world. In the melting pot of ideas that is online media, anti-consumerism has fused with and influenced new ideologies such as environmentalism and minimalism, as well as spawning social media incarnations like ‘No Buy 2025’ and ‘Underconsumption core’. Last year saw [‘Underconsumption Core’](#) become one of the notable tiktok trends of 2024, highlighting how individuals were pivoting to shopping less and instead reusing and recycling. Part of the motivation is to reduce spending, but its also a deliberate stance against overconsumption culture (yes there was also an ‘overconsumption core’ trend last year).

[‘No Buy 2025’](#) is the latest trend to resonate with minimalist consumers. The trend encourages people to go a whole year without buying anything beyond the normal necessities to get by. If spending can’t be avoided, thrift shops, third-party marketplaces and community apps are an option instead of buying brand new. Although ‘No Buy 2025’ is not going to put a dent into global sales any time soon, it reveals a turning tide in customer behaviour – from valuing price and convenience above all to beginning to see brands favoured as a reflection of their own identity. According to Innova Market Insights, over half of European consumers [agree](#) with the statement that they believe their food and beverage choices largely reflect their values and beliefs. As Gen Z become more influential in the marketplace, brands are increasingly catering to the values and preferences of the younger generations and the issues they face, from sustainability concerns to a more clutter-free and minimalist lifestyle.

Why It Matters for Marketers

Traditional marketing tactics no longer hold the same sway, and consumer priorities are evolving at a breakneck pace. Unprecedented connectivity means it has never been easier to get in front of a consumer, but [Ad Fatigue](#) and desensitisation make it harder

than ever to get them to care. Over a third of UK consumers [stated](#) they were keen to start a New Year "digital detox" in 2025. "Some of that on-the-nose marketing doesn't land like it used to," says lead of Kearney Consumer Institute Katie Thomas. "The way engaging with brands feels more natural and less like an advertisement, that's what consumers will want to see from marketers going forward."

In tune brands are increasingly switching to in-person marketing and organic engagement (see Patagonia's [Worn Wear](#) pop-up) as customers turn off from the artifice of targeted marketing. These strategies are a way for brands to de-emphasize hard selling and instead focus on building trust and authenticity. By creating spaces for self-ownership and participation, like pop-up events, local collaborations or workshops, brands signal that they care more about the bottom line. Treat people like humans first, customers second: that's how trust and loyalty are built.

Consumer loyalty is a double-edged sword, however, and betraying that trust can spell ruin for reckless brands. Zeno's recent study on Brand Love found that across the globe 75% of consumers would become more selective if they felt a brand broke its trust. Indeed, the power of consumer action is apparent to none more than Target Inc. After being one of the most prominent corporate voices on DEI and championing support for Black-owned business, Target's 180 on DEI threw the company into the middle of a storm of boycotts and online backlash, resulting in [11 weeks](#) of falling foot traffic at its stores. Amazon, Tesla and Walmart join Target on the receiving end of [an organised boycott movement](#) protesting a range of issues from shifting stances on DEI to work conditions and pay. The message here is that ordinary citizens increasingly feel they are being backed into a wall politically and economically, and brands that fan those flames will burn long-term trust.

With all that being said, prolonged enthusiasm for any social media trend is a rare sight, and substantial behavioural change is even rarer. Minimalist Youtuber Immy Lucas [remarked](#) that since promoting underconsumption as a lifestyle, not a single brand has reached out for a collaboration or sponsorship on Instagram. This stands to reason: not many brands will benefit from their consumers buying less. However, the space is growing, with Gen Z being increasingly more environmentally and socially conscious than their predecessors, and Immy does clarify that she still receives offers on other platforms.

Resilience is Key

When backlash hits, the instinct for many brands is to go silent, waiting for the online conversation to move onto the next controversy. But silence often amplifies mistrust.

To rebuild trust, brands must lean into clear and transparent communication. Receiving backlash, while challenging, also presents [opportunities](#) for understanding your audience and rebuilding trust.

According to Business Expert Doug Melville, *transparency* lies at the heart of this rebuilding process. Consumers are not content with PR statements and corporate slogan. They need to understand why decisions are being made, see genuine empathy and understanding from leaders, and see tangible change and commitments.

Companies that demonstrate they can survive a downturn will have earned customer trust when the belt is loosened. In times of political and economic volatility, brands should avoid playing it safe.

As culture and circumstances shift, so too will the needs and expectations of the customers brands serve. When shoppers cut back on unnecessary spending, brands must speak to their values and deliver tangible value above all else – or risk being left behind.

Five Practical Ways Brands Can Adapt

1. Amp up the value messaging

Amid constant change, timeless business principles still stand. Putting value at the heart of business and communications is one of them - customers will always look for the most bang for their buck. More importantly, you want to be known for value, not price. “It’s a slippery slope if you focus too much on price it’s a bottomless pit because someone will always be priced below,” says founder and CEO of New England Consulting Group Gary Stibel.

Value is intrinsically a subjective thing, making it more complex to market. However, transparency, real-world utility and customer advocacy are all ways to show, not tell, the utility of your brand.

2. Simplify Offerings

As we touched on earlier, saturation is at all time high: the average person is exposed to between [4,000 and 10,000](#) advertisements every day. In this new environment, doing less is more, and this principle can be embedded throughout your business.

3. Tone down the opulence

As households grappled with the aftermath of the 2008 recession, “stealth wealth” became a popular term to describe affluent consumers keeping their financial means under wraps. Brands could learn to be more sensitive and shy away from flaunting their most luxurious, high-end products, instead of alienating their less privileged customers.

4. KYC deeply

Understanding your audience is key to marketing effectively to them. In a time when consumers are making tough decisions about their non-necessities, brands need to have the pulse on how their goods are being used, and what can be improved.

Beyond the sale, brands can solidify loyalty through educational content, meaningful loyalty programmes and experiences that empower rather than pressure consumers. Show gratitude through personal touches, such as handwritten thank-you notes or exclusive VIP events for long-term customers, fostering goodwill and encouraging repeat business.

5. Target media by region

The ability to target media to certain geographies is indispensable as brands aim to maximise the ROI on their ad spend and tailor messaging for customers at different income levels. Brands should be wary of overreliance on media tools. Without sense-checking outgoing media, brands can find themselves appearing tone-deaf and fall victim to the growing economic disparities in geographic regions.

CASE STUDY

Lessons from Japan: Minimalism in Action

Japan is a country that has experienced stagnating economic growth in the last few decades, sometimes termed the ‘Lost Decades’. Despite this, Japanese brands are highly successful and admired across the world, from Uniqlo in fashion to Nintendo in electronics.

As we saw in some of the arguments presented in this article, the UK and other nations are experiencing turning tides, as the ideological support which propped up consumerism begins to shake. In this sense, Japan is an excellent case study for what a less-consumerist, slower-growing business landscape could look like in the UK. Many

Japanese brands have crossed the bridge and become household names for UK consumers.

The Rise of UNIQLO

In 2004 UNIQLO pledged to a [Global Quality Declaration](#) to dispel existing misconceptions that “UNIQLO is cheap”. The company doubled down on quality and distanced the brand from its low-cost image, intending to become “the world’s leading casual clothes company.” The PR and business strategies worked hand in hand to transition brand image from mediocre quality, low-cost image to a high-value brand.

The appeal of UNIQLO’s brand can be distilled into three pillars, serving as a blueprint for brands hoping to adapt to a changing consumer landscape.

1. Aesthetic Minimalism & Utility

UNIQLO symbolises simplicity and function, resonating with consumers seeking substance over status, particularly in times of economic uncertainty, when value per wear is paramount. The brand avoids fast fashion trends, instead focusing on classic, evergreen pieces that withstand the test of time. Additionally, at the core of UNIQLO’s offering is utility and innovation, with product lines like HEATTECH and AIRism designed to bring comfort and practicality to everyday wear. These technologies reflect the company’s broader goal: to offer high-quality, functional apparel that delivers tangible value with every use.

2. Ethical Sourcing & Sustainability

As part of its long-term commitment to sustainability, UNIQLO has introduced initiatives like RE.UNIQLO, a program aimed at collecting, recycling, and repurposing used garments. The initiative underscores the brand’s ambition to produce clothing that is not only high in quality but also environmentally responsible. RE.UNIQLO is a reflection of the company’s evolving definition of quality – one that goes beyond durability to include ethical sourcing, waste reduction, and accountability in the global supply chain. In an economy of increasingly conscious consumerism, UNIQLO has aligned itself with modern values and gained loyalty from the upcoming generations.

3. Uncluttered, Intentional Shopping Experience

UNIQLO’s retail environments, both online and in-store, are curated to be clean, minimal, and distraction-free, reflecting the brand’s design philosophy and the growing influence of minimalism in its customers’ lifestyles. Stores are organized in a way that prioritizes ease of navigation and intentional decision-making, steering away from the overstimulation and non-stop deals often associated with fast fashion outlets. In doing



so, UNIQLO has cultivated a retail atmosphere that reinforces its identity as a brand of simplicity, quality, and purpose.
