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Associated Press

Meet the 'transumer': less treasure, more pleasure

By TAMARA LUSH, 06.29.09, 02:51 PM EDT



MIAMI -- Cassandra Smith spends \$800 a month renting designer handbags and leases a luxury condo in downtown Miami. Environmentalist Zoe Turill helped create a bike-sharing program at the University of Denver.

Though they might seem to come from different ends of the consumption spectrum, they have something in common: They're not buying things.

The rise of rental or borrowing services catering from everyone from fashionistas to environmentalists has even spawned a marketing buzzword: the "transumer."

It's a lifestyle that's "less about treasure and more about pleasure," according Reinier Evers of Trendwatching, an Amsterdam-based market-research firm that coined the term.

It almost seems anti-American to rent, rather than buy; a look at the popular reality TV show "Clean House" is a testament to Americans' love of accumulating stuff. But Evers says that in this global recession, people are warming to the idea of renting, and not buying, certain goods - because of cost, ease or space considerations.

"On the one hand, you have consumers who want to collect as many experiences and part-time possessions as possible," Evers said. "And then there are transumers who value non-ownership for environmental reasons: to only use something when you really need it, which involves everything from renting to passing something on to the next person."

From rented Chanel sunglasses to the auto-sharing service Zipcars to fractional ownership of a jet to movies from Netflix (NFLX - news - people), the pickings are good for transumers.

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In recent years, many more companies are renting things at all levels: Wear Today, Gone Tomorrow rents designer clothes (A \$495 Vera Wang rents for \$49 a week, plus a \$10 cleaning charge), Rentobile leases the latest in cell phones and iRent2u rents almost anything (think ladders and power tools) in a Craigslist-like setting.

Even the nonprofit DogsAspen in Colorado is unintentionally getting in on the transumer act; the "Rent A Pet" program allows resort visitors who have been forced to leave pets at home "the opportunity to fill the void by spending a day outside the shelter with one of the animals."

There's even a Web site devoted to high-end transumerism. UK-based FractionalLife.com is a portal for those seeking to share Ferraris, art, holiday homes and even racehorses.

"Luxury is perhaps not what you own, but what you do," says Piers Brown, founder of Fractional Life.

Brown says during this downturn, people are reluctant to shoulder the costs of buying and maintaining expensive things - which may be why property and jets are among the most popular items on his Web site.

FIU's Rodriguez says she expects the trend to continue once the economy recovers.

"I don't think this is a trend that will go away, simply because it is about collecting the experiences and the stories," she said.

There's also the "eco-transumer," like Turrill.

The 22-year-old worked with another student to raise \$50,000 to start their "bike library." Come fall, some 600 bikes will be placed at 40 kiosks around the city so people can rent the two-wheelers by the hour or day.

"Why does an individual have to hold the responsibility for all the maintenance when a community could hold that responsibility?" she said.

Rentals also reduce the amount of natural resources spent on producing an item, says Eric Ginsberg of Bookswim, a New Jersey-based book rental company.

"There's a tremendous amount of natural resources used to make books, DVDs, you name it," he said. "Sharing an item also saves driving to and from the store. Our books come in the mail. Our books are essentially taking mass transit to get to our customers."

Bookswim would not give out sales figures or the number of their subscribers, but Ginsberg said that in the past year and a half, the company's membership has risen 500 percent.

In Miami, Smith, 29, is more concerned about fashion. Her latest rentals from Avelle (formerly Bag, Borrow or Steal) include a cherry red patent leather clutch by Louis Vuitton.

The medical device saleswoman has several drawers filled with purses she bought in her pre-rental days. Now, she's not sure what to do with them.

"Once I've used a purse for a while, I'm done with it," she says. "I've moved onto another trend."

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Associated Press writer Suzette Laboy in Miami contributed to this article.

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