Leaders: DNA all over the place; The curse of untidiness

ABSTRACT

Modern life disapproves of clutter, almost as much as it scorns obesity and fidgeting. Cubicle life and hot-desking make no allowance for employees who own anything. Architects and designers, like Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, long ago tried to eliminate clutter from the home, and, along with the arbiters of taste, the high cost of housing argues against clutter. If you want to keep up with fashion, in handbags and iPhones, it is constantly in with the new. Modern life demands that the old should go out at the same time. Yet where nature creates a problem, the market provides a solution. What Ritalin is to ADHD, and liposuction is to obesity, the personal-organisation industry can be to clutter. These professionals offer not just order, but also sympathy. The clutter industry feeds the addiction. Since the urge to accumulate stuff is limitless, so is the scope for selling people stuff to keep it in.

FULL TEXT

Clutter is not just an evolutionary adaptation, but also a business opportunity

AN OBJECT is worth more to you if you already own it. Researchers found that some Cornell students who would choose a chocolate bar over a coffee mug start to prefer the mug once they have been given one. This "endowment effect" has been spotted with all sorts of things, from basketball tickets to shares and petrol vouchers. The question that has puzzled economists is just why a supposedly clever species like Homo sapiens should fall prey to something so irrational.

Now scientists may have provided an answer. The endowment effect has been seen in brain-imaging studies in people and in chimps (see Science and Technology), which suggests it is an evolutionary adaptation. Trade was risky when there were no contracts, law or language. The bird in the hand was worth even more when bushes were dangerous.

Are humans, then, hardwired to cling on to their possessions? If so, this primordial instinct joins a lengthening list of maladaptations to modern life. Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may have suited a nomad, because the itch to wander off led to serendipitous discoveries of food and mates. The ability to store food as fat was handy if food was sometimes scarce. Such adaptations may have done the human race nicely when it was chasing wildebeest in the savannah, but they are worse than useless in the Googleplex. The fat, the impulsive and the untidy are genetically normal, but they are equipped for yesteryear. The thin, the focused and the neat are freaks— but they are cut out for success.

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of housing argues against clutter. If you want to keep up with fashion, in handbags and iPhones, it is constantly in with the new. Modern life demands that the old should go out at the same time.

A neat solution

Yet where nature creates a problem, the market provides a solution. What Ritalin is to ADHD, and liposuction is to obesity, the personal-organisation industry can be to clutter. These professionals offer not just order, but also sympathy. America's National Association for Professional Organisers speaks of "Chronic Disorganisation"; hoarders everywhere will take comfort from those capital letters. You can imagine the advice that follows: "Go home, take this remote-control caddy, watch an entire series of 'House Doctor', and you should feel better in the morning."

The clutter industry feeds the addiction. Self-storage has been the fastest-growing part of America's commercial-property business in the past 30 years. There are now almost seven square feet of self-storage for every American. Paying more to store something than it is worth may seem doubly irrational. But it enables people to reconcile caveman clutter with modern minimalism, and allows companies to benefit from a huge business opportunity that includes inflatable salad bars, overdoor baseball cap organisers and motion-activated paper-towel dispensers. Since the urge to accumulate stuff is limitless, so is the scope for selling people stuff to keep it in.

DETAILS

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