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Don't buy it, share it

Consumers with a green conscience are turning to hiring and sharing sites to save money while getting the benefits of modern technology

Sarah Butler. 11 December 2011



The consumer revolution in borrowing rather than buying has government backing (Altrendo)

Nichole Sweetsur was heading to Devon on a family holiday, from her home in the Channel Islands. Rather than wrestle a pushchair for her toddler on to the plane, she found another solution.

She contacted a woman who was willing to lend her one for the weekend — for £15. Sweetsur is one of thousands choosing to hire household items through peer-to-peer lending sites such as Ecomodo, Rentmyitems and Zilok.

They offer a cheap and greener way of sourcing DIY equipment, garden tools and baby gear without the need to buy. As borrowing and hiring increase, consumption of the planet's resources should fall.

It's a consumer revolution that has the backing of the government's Waste & Resources Action Programme (Wrap), which has called for a fifth of all household spending, about £180 billion a year, to move from buying to hiring by 2020.

Wrap estimates up to 90% of the tool market could switch from sales to hiring by 2050.

Sweetsur is using Ecomodo to rent out a child's car seat and a lawnmower. Apart from the pushchair, she has hired a blow-up bed for visitors and is currently looking for a trestle table for her Christmas party.

“Right now everybody is looking at how much they spend and, if I can save some money, I definitely will,” said Sweetsur. “But for me it's also about convenience and making myself feel a little bit better about the environment. It's a little step, like turning the heating down one degree.”

Peer-to-peer lending sites sit in a sweet spot where tighter purse strings and environmental awareness converge. Rarely used items can become valuable assets. The average electric drill, for example, is used for 10 to 20 minutes before being discarded, according to some studies. Other research shows that 80% of household items are used less than once a month.

By becoming what the lending sites like to call a “rentrepreneur”, those items can earn a few pounds a day rather than simply gathering dust.

Ecomodo, Zilok and Rentmyitems all have slightly different models, but make their money by charging a commission to people who hire from the site or a fee to those who list items.

Zilok and Rentmyitems allow businesses to rent out items through the site, alongside members of the public. All the sites have eBay-style rating systems for lenders and borrowers to help give confidence that goods will be handed back and paid for. Ecomodo also offers insurance.

Meriel Lenfestey, co-founder of Ecomodo, said: “It's common sense to maximise the utility of things we have.”



The rapid development of technology in devices such as phones and televisions means that people no longer want to hold on to items that may soon be superseded.

Rachel Botsman, author of What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption, said sites that allow the rental of household goods are part of a wider trend in which people increasingly want to pay for the use of an item rather than the product itself.

The likes of Spotify, the music site, and Netflix, the video-rental service, are at the forefront of this trend.

Botsman believes that big business is also now recognising that sharing sites are not about “destroying consumerism” but offer a potentially useful service model. “They see it can deepen loyalty with customers,” she said.

The idea of peer-to-peer lending took off about four to five years ago with sites such as Airbnb, which allows people to rent out their home, or just a room, for holidays.

Airbnb now has 100,000 rooms on offer and 3m reservations were made through its site in the past six months — three times the number it racked up in its first three and a half years in business.

Then came car-sharing sites, like Whipcar, which allow people to rent cars from people living nearby. It is only now that the sharing trend is moving from big, high-value items to everyday, lower-priced consumer goods.

The new wave of sites that focus on lending smaller household goods is in its infancy.

Ecomodo, launched in April last year, has 2,200 members and 1,347 items for rent on its books. It is adding new members at a rate of 100 a month.

Rentmyitems was launched in September. It has only 516 members but 1,500 items to rent because of a partnership with Hire Station, the rental business. It expects to have 60,000 items listed within the next two years.

Zilok, which was launched in France and Belgium in 2007, is expanding into Britain. It has 150,000 members in France and about 300,000 items for hire, including cars. It has been growing by 25% a year and expects to exceed that this year after introducing insurance.

Gary Cige, co-founder, said the company is building up its team in Britain because interest here has soared in recent months.

Environmentalists think lending sites have the potential to decouple economic growth from the rising use of resources.

Dax Lovegrove, head of business and industry at the environmental pressure group WWF, said: “Large companies increasingly acknowledge that the traditional way of buying a product, using it occasionally and then throwing it away, is incredibly wasteful.”

He said the rise of lending sites means that big businesses that have dabbled with the idea of selling the use of a product rather than the product itself are now taking it more seriously.

Ian Cheshire, chief executive of Kingfisher, owner of the B&Q DIY chain, has said that the company is examining how it might move from selling items such as power drills to selling the use of them, perhaps through leasing.

Its French Castorama chain has begun to experiment with how the business could tap into the peer-to-peer lending trend. Its scheme Les Troc Heures, which translates as “barter hours”, enables customers to share knowledge and time rather than hard goods. A client laying a patio can ask for help from someone with experience and in exchange offer to put up some shelves or mow the lawn.

Since the launch of the scheme in June, 3,000 members have signed up and 800 exchanges have been made.