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In Search Of 'not Made In China\' Some Wisconsin Consumers Are Worrying About The Safety Of Chinese-made Products And Looking For Alternatives.

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 By ANITA CLARK aclark@madison.com 608-252-6138

Mariann Rush started making telephone calls in May. She wanted to know the source of ingredients in her food, moisturizer, soap and other products. Specifically, she wanted to know if they came from China.

"I called my first company directly, since nobody's been protecting me," said Rush, 74, a Fitchburg retiree who describes herself as curious.

Her unease about products from China reflects widespread consumer anxiety fueled by recent recalls of pet-killing food, contaminated toothpaste and children's toys coated with lead paint.

One Louisiana family vowed to live a year without buying anything from China, an experiment that produced the book "A Year Without 'Made in China'" by Sara Bongiorno.

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From their coffee maker to their children's shoes, Bongiorno found their nearly impossible quest left them with "an eye-popping view of just how much we rely on China for the daily products we use," as she described it in an online interview last month with Foreign Policy magazine.

Wisconsin consumer protection officials have received calls from consumers trying to identify recalled products, and some stores are fielding customer questions about the origin of their toys.

Even if few people expect to boycott all products from China, consumers are rattled. Advocacy groups are calling for tougher government standards, and several groups report renewed interest in the power of purchasing - whether it's eating local food or choosing fair-trade coffee or patronizing local businesses.

A POSITIVE CHOICE

"We think every choice that people make can make a positive difference," said Josie Pradella, coordinator of the Dane Buy Local Initiative and director of Wisconsin Partners for SustainAbility. People are asking "what's the best and safest product I can buy?"

That's what they're asking at Capitol Kids, 8 S. Carroll St., where owner Peg Scholtes has been gathering statements from her suppliers to address customers' questions about the origin and safety of their products.

"Everybody is taking this very seriously," she said.

Scholtes expects she'll be selling more toys like the Whittle wooden trains made in Missouri and blocks made in Michigan and Minnesota.

Brian Yocom, owner of Cornerstone Learning Connections, 1310 Mendota St., is searching for more American suppliers of educational books and toys in response to customer demand.

At J.T. Puffin's, 5505 Odana Road, manager Jenny Goodlund said, "People are starting to ask where things are manufactured," she said. "Customers are asking if there's any history of problems."

Customers may be asking, but they'll keep buying inexpensive products from China, said Moses Altsech, a professor of marketing at Edgewood College.



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Just as people complain when chain discounters drive out mom-and-pop operations but then shop at the chains, he said, U.S. customers consistently choose lower-priced products regardless of their origin.

"I really don't think people are going to change," Altsech said.

China is less mindful of quality control and customer satisfaction, just as U.S. manufacturers were in the past, he said, but that will change as China recognizes sloppy manufacturing and poor quality hurts them.

CHRISTMAS TOY SALES

He predicts Chinese-made toys will sell just fine this fall.

"If toys made in China don't sell for Christmas, I'm going to dance the hula on the Capitol steps for you," Altsech said.

Most people won't look at labels to see where the toy was made, he said, "and the few who do will shake their head and put it in their cart."

What's a consumer to do?

* Toy-buyers, wherever they shop, should heed age guidelines, Scholtes said. She's heard customers declare their 18-month-old is so smart he can handle toys labeled for older children.

"Just because a child is very smart doesn't mean they should be playing with small pieces," Scholtes said.

* Pay attention to recall notices. Consumers may sign up to receive e-mail warnings at www.recalls.gov, a site with links to other government regulatory agencies.

* Tell Congress you want a stronger Consumer Product Safety Commission, said Bruce Speight of Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group, an advocacy group. "There's lots of evidence this is a broader problem (than recent recalls) that needs to be fixed," he said.

* Think about what you buy.

Wisconsin Partners for Sustainability is preparing material for a "Conscious Consumer Discussion Course" this fall in which people will meet in study circles to talk about purchasing issues in such areas as food, clothing and toys.

* Ask questions. Rush, the curious consumer, said a few companies have been helpful, though others claim information is proprietary. "I think it means it's none of your business," she said.

She never intended to boycott all Chinese products, she said, but became interested after reading newspaper stories about recalls. As a cancer survivor, "you just pay attention to health more," she said.

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