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## Sharing love in the global economy Tough to find gifts that don't do great harm

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I'm struggling to find a Valentine's Day gift for my wife that shows I really care.

Unfortunately, the Valentine standbys -- flowers, chocolates, jewelry, perfume, lingerie, stuffed animals -- have all become symbols of much that is wrong in the global economy. These products, which are meant to show we care, really point to how little we know about the impacts of our consumption.

Let's take a global tour of our Valentine's Day options.

-- Roses. Ninety percent of the almost 1 billion roses we import each year come from Colombia and Ecuador. On one hand, this is great. Growing roses and other cut flowers provides income and jobs in these countries -- potentially displacing the production of coca.



Hobbs News-Sun / Tammy McKinley

However, growing flowers half a continent away requires highly chemical- intensive methods and air freighting to the United States. And while this helps ensure that my roses are pest-free and perky when I buy them, it also leads to low-paid farm workers with few rights and even fewer protections being exposed to more than 100 kinds of pesticides. Recent cases of mass- poisonings of Colombian farm workers make me wonder whether that floral fragrance my wife loves now has a tinge of pesticides.

-- Chocolate. Almost 70 percent of the cocoa beans we consume in the United States every year (or really the \$10 billion worth of chocolate made from these beans) comes from West Africa. The Ivory Coast alone accounts for 43 percent of world exports of cocoa.



Chronicle / Michael Maloney

Unfortunately, the Ivory Coast is also rife with child labor, and the U.S. State Department estimates that 15,000 children work on cocoa, coffee and cotton farms. These children handle dangerous machetes to harvest the cocoa, apply pesticides without protection, and suffer under generally horrendous conditions to harvest a commodity they will probably never taste.

-- Jewelry. If you're a big spender, maybe you'll consider gold or diamonds for that special someone. But these high-priced baubles have high costs to the environment and human rights.

Major controversies have erupted recently over toxic pollution from cyanide heap leaching in the gold-mining industry, as well as community health impacts from mining, displacement of indigenous people and even the funding of an al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group by a gold-mining company in the Philippines.



Diamonds may be even worse. The mining and trade in "conflict diamonds," as they have come to be known, have been shown to fund and fuel armed conflicts in countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone. A gem that might cost us one month's salary costs many young men in these countries their lives.

-- Perfume. This seems like a safe, American-made bet. Unfortunately, perfumes may literally be Poison™ for an Eternity™. Recent studies have shown that many perfumes sold in the United States contain chemicals called phthalates that can damage the liver, kidneys, lungs and reproductive system, especially the developing testes. These compounds have been banned in cosmetics and personal care products in the European Union, but remain in perfumes sold in the United States.



-- Lingerie. With the freeing of world trade in apparel, China has emerged as the one-stop shop for underwear, bras, socks and even romantic lingerie. All you have to do to see the globalization of our underwear is to look on the tags at Victoria's Secret.



Chronicle / Mark Costantini

Looking beyond these labels, it is difficult to avoid discovering violations of overtime and minimum- wage laws, repeated cases of worker abuse, lack of trade unions and minimal enforcement of labor and environmental laws. Buying a garment made in China means buying a product in all likelihood made in a sweatshop. Ditto for those cutesy stuffed-toy Valentine's bears.

So where does this leave me?

One option is no gift. I recognize, however, that presenting my loved one with an ethical argument against Valentine's Day gifts may not win me much affection (although it may garner cheers of relief from those looking for an excuse to avoid roses and chocolates four times their normal price).

But this isn't just a cheap way to get out of giving a Valentine's Day gift. (Seriously, honey!) This is a real conundrum and an increasingly common predicament in our global economy. Even when we want to do good, it is not obvious how to act, what to buy or how to truly show we care.

Most consumers have no idea that these sweet, fragrant, sparkling, beautiful gifts can have such dark, foul and bitter undersides. And how could they? For years, corporate leaders and politicians have trumpeted the benefits of globalization and simultaneously done their best to hide its impact on people and the environment.

This is beginning to change. In each of these industries, efforts are now under way to force out more information on the impacts of global products, to set minimum standards for their production and to establish some means for monitoring and enforcing these standards.

Revlon and L'Oreal even recently agreed to demands from health advocates to comply with European standards for the perfumes they sell in the United States, thereby phasing out phthalates.

But even the occasional "good" product simply begs the bigger question of how we can determine the impact of the products we buy, and then have some influence over this.

And while the U.S. government can't regulate conditions in Chinese factories, Colombian farms or Indonesian mines, it could require that firms provide information about their products' impacts. This would motivate leading companies to provide both information and alternatives, thereby allowing consumers to select

the level of social and environmental concern they are comfortable with.

Until this happens, it is up to us to show we care by asking our favorite brands how their products are made and whom they affect.

And for this Valentine's Day, I'll just try to find some organic flowers at the local farmers' market and maybe some phthalate-free beauty products.

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