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Group's rejection of consumerism creates converts

By Carolyn Jones

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SAN FRANCISCO — For Shawn Rosenmoss, the deal-breaker was a drill bit.

John Perry's worst temptation was a plumber's snake for his clogged drain.

Sarah Pelmas and Matt Eddy succumbed to the siren song of new white paint.

But aside from the occasional hardware crises, the Compact — an ever-growing group who have vowed not to buy anything new except food, medicine and underwear — is going strong on its first anniversary.

The Compact originated in December 2005 at a San Francisco dinner party, where guests decided to take recycling one step further and go for a year without new purchases. Consumerism, they said, is destroying the world and most of us already own far more than we need.

They called themselves the Compact as a semi-joking reference to the solemn commitment of the Mayflower pilgrims, but the concept is being taken quite seriously and has quickly spread.

They've been featured in newspapers across the United States and Europe and on the "Today" show, "Good Morning America," "CBS Evening News," TV news in China and Poland, and countless shock-jock radio programs. They were offered book contracts and at least two TV reality shows, all of which they turned down because it seemed contrary to the Compact principles.

Almost 3,000 people from six continents have joined the Compact group on Yahoo, and chapters have sprung up around the globe from Alabama to New Zealand.

"It's been staggering," said Compact co-founder John Perry, who works in communications at a Silicon Valley technology company. "We never set out to start a movement or be holier-than-thou models of righteous behavior, but it's been very gratifying to see the impact."

Participants say the Compact has been a rewarding experience. Compacters are allowed to buy secondhand items and are encouraged to borrow and reuse whatever possible.

Kids' birthday parties? That's easy. Rosenmoss lets her daughters, who are not bound by the compact, spend their allowance money on new gifts for friends, or encourages them to make something.

Pelmas, a high school administrator, and Eddy, a high school science teacher, bought a house in 2006 and managed extensive renovations with only one trip to the hardware store. They needed white paint for their ceilings. It's easy to find surplus paint in colors, which they used for the walls, but impossible to find surplus white paint.

Rosenmoss broke the Compact only twice, when she needed a drill bit and when she needed sleeping bags for her kids.

"I looked for used sleeping bags, but frankly the idea was so gross I just couldn't do it," said Rosenmoss, an

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engineer for the city of San Francisco. "It was like buying used underwear. So I gave myself a reprieve."

But Perry has not veered once from the Compact rules. His bathroom sink has been plugged for months, and it'll stay that way until he finds a drain snake at Thrift Town.

Overall, the year of anti-consumerism has been unexpectedly rewarding, they said.

Most of the original Compacters planned to renew their vow for 2007, but Pelmas and Eddy said they'd had enough — they're headed to Crate and Barrel on Jan. 1.

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