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CottBot: ethical buying made easy

We all like to think we vote with our dollars: from giving money to charities, to making an effort to support local businesses, where we spend our money demonstrates what we support. But we spend money lots of places, and it is hard to know if all of them have principles that align with our own ethics. And this makes boycotting businesses whose principles do not align with ours more difficult. Researching where we shop is time consuming, and not always a viable option.

Enter **CottBot**, a mobile application and social media platform that will provide users with vetted information on businesses’ ethics to help consumers make informed choices about where they leave their money.

“It’s a boycott of actions and agendas that can be shared by a wide range of people,” said **Austen Hoogen**, a programmer, Tacoma native, and creator of CottBot, who hopes to change the way we boycott.



He was inspired to pursue the idea last month, when it appeared Arizona was going to pass a religious discrimination law that allowed businesses to refuse service to gay customers based on their faith. There was a **call to boycott the entire state**. Lawmakers and the media even asked the NFL to move next year’s Super Bowl, along with the financial benefits.

Hoogen, however, thought that a state-wide boycott would have been a mistake.“I felt the all-out boycott proposed was a bad idea, not because of its symbolic appeal, but because it would harm our Arizona allies just as much as it would harm our adversaries,” he said.

So Hoogen decided to use the programming skills he has been cultivating since age 11 to produce a

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technology that would allow for easy, targeted boycotts: a more effective way of voting with dollars.

“It’s a social network that instead of connecting you to people you know, it connects you with people in a network that share your principles and values,” Hoogen said.

The application, which will be available initially on iPhone, Android, and on the web, will provide a platform to share information about businesses that will allow other users to make informed choices.

If you are looking to shop only pro-union businesses, or don’t want to spend money at stores carrying sweatshop products, CottBot will make it easy to find places that align with your values. The app will provide information on business practices, political stances, products, and anything else members of the network find relevant to their principles.

Although CottBot is not the first ethical buying app, it is unique to the market, because it makes shopping by your values easy. Apps like Buycott allow users to scan UPC barcodes, and learn information about the origins of their product. However, the retailer where a shopper is purchasing the item may be at odds with the campaigns they have joined; CottBot will monitor not only products, but the places that sell them as well.

Once users tell the app their core values, it will create a map of businesses based on the information that has been placed in the network by other members. The app will also give businesses a rating based on how against, or in support of, a certain value a business is.

One of the main, and most exciting aspects of the app, is that if you enter a business that doesn’t align with your values, your phone will alert you. This ease of information will make voting with your dollars as easy as having your cell phone in your pocket.

“CottBot’s primary benefit is that it is still working for you, even when you aren’t paying attention to it,” Hoogen said.

CottBot will also provide an arena for conversation between businesses and the public. It will function on a self-policing model where information will be vetted by other users, and businesses can officially speak for themselves as well, helping to prevent boycotts based on lies.

Hoogen hopes the application will be released in a beta version within the next few months, and a fully vetted version available in about six months. Currently, he is working to launch an IndieGoGo crowdfunding campaign. CottBot needs to raise \$500,000 that will go to hiring more developers, and supporting the bandwidth and servers required to launch an app.

The campaign will feature a video on the technology by Joey Trimmer, Seattle based filmmaker at Notion Studios, and friend of Hoogen. Through it he hopes to demonstrate the power of CottBot, which he believes is in giving consumers the ability to cut through an overwhelming amount of information and harness that which is relevant to their principles when they make purchases.

“If we could fine tune what we wanted to listen to, causes that were important to us personally, suddenly all of this information can be put to good use,” said Trimmer. “I really loved that idea.”

After its development the app will be free to download and use, but will function on a “pay what you want” model like Wikipedia. Hoogen will also maintain the app ad free to prevent outside influence that may give the impression businesses can pay for favorable ratings.

The IndieGoGo campaign will launch on March 24th, to learn more on how to support Cottbot visit cottbot.org.

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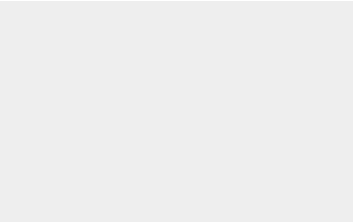
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About the Author



Eva Reveal Eva Reveal is from Puyallup, but spends most of her time in Tacoma where she studies Communications and Computer Science at the University of Washington Tacoma, and works as Editor in Chief of the university’s newspaper, The Ledger.

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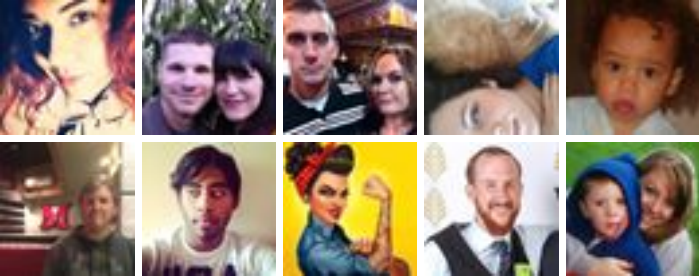
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