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Blue voters now urged to buy blue

By Jennifer Skalka
Tribune staff reporter

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For despondent Democrats there's a new treatment, if not a cure, for their lingering Election Day blues. Think retail therapy.

A Web site called Choose the Blue is offering shopping advice this holiday season, providing information about which companies' employees give to Democrats and which prefer Republicans.

Costco workers gave more to Democrats, for example, while Wal-Mart's preferred Republicans, according to campaign finance records. Donna Karan's people lean left. Fruit of the Loom's give to the right.

For Ann and Bill Duvall, the site's creators, Nov. 3 brought great disappointment--and a call to action.

"We woke up that morning just really devastated and depressed, and in some ways I'm grateful that we came up with this idea because that's where we've been able to put our energy," Ann Duvall, 56, said.

So Choose the Blue is self-help meets activism meets consumerism. Its goal is to shift vast amounts of wealth to people who support the Democrats' cause.

Using information from the Federal Election Commission Web site and the Center for Responsive Politics site, www.opensecrets.org, the Duvalls give their fellow Democrats a gift that could keep on giving.

"If each American who voted for John Kerry spends \$100 in 2005 on a blue company instead of a red company, we can move \$5 billion away from Republican companies and add \$5 billion to the income of companies who donate to Democrats," they say on the site.

In the few weeks since the Duvalls launched the site, it has gained growing notice in the blogosphere. Blogs with names like Angryfinger point to it for inspiration. The Duvalls have heard that their effort was mentioned on Air America, the liberal radio station.

Within days of the election, the Duvalls asked 10 of their friends to review their Web site and tell them what worked and what didn't. Whether the friends spread the word or bloggers stumbled upon the unpublicized Choose the Blue site is unclear. But shortly thereafter the Duvalls, who split their time between Silicon

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Valley and Idaho, started getting e-mails from strangers thanking them for their work.

At its peak, the site received more than 300,000 hits in one day, said Ann Duvall, a mother of three and grandmother of four. Typically between 100,000 and 200,000 sets of eyes peruse it daily.

"This is not a boycott," said Bill Duvall, a software creator who was involved in the transmission of the first e-mail message 35 years ago. "... It's just that we believe it's possible to direct some of your spending so we can begin to at least even the playing field."

Choose the Blue breaks down its information into categories such as automotive, consumer electronics, retail shopping and fashion, and sports. The site's tallies also include gifts from companies to political action committees. The figures for the companies and their employees show the total percentages and dollar amounts given to Republican and Democratic candidates or causes.

Choose the Blue is joined in cyberland by Buy Blue, a site with a similar mission. Its mantra is: "In today's America there's a more powerful act than voting blue, and that's buying blue." It also urges people to have a "blue Christmas" and says: "Find out which businesses have been naughty and which have been nice. Shop accordingly!"

Though experts applaud the initiative taken by creators of these sites, they aren't sure their strategy is sound. After all, Republicans too can take advantage of the information they're providing.

"The question that remains then is which side does a better job of spreading the word to those who are most likely to act on it," said Eszter Hargittai, an assistant professor of sociology at Northwestern University and a faculty fellow in the Institute for Policy Research.

Richard Feinberg of Purdue University said most people don't make their shopping decisions based on personal ideology. They look for the best bargains or the most convenient stores.

"The handful of people that it might influence are already boycotting or not spending money on businesses that they think go against their political grain," said Feinberg, director of the school's Center for Customer Driven Quality. "It's not going to change a neutral person."

Although innovative and purposeful, Choose the Blue illustrates something perhaps unintended about some of the people who voted for Sens. Kerry and John Edwards. As exhausting and frustrating as the loss was for them, they're not done fighting.

Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, a Washington, D.C., non-profit, said Choose the Blue is ultimately a sign of that discontent. Gans said the Democrats' future success, however, would not depend on the power of smaller movements. He said the party must re-evaluate its purpose, and with temperatures still high after a close election, raising money won't be its main challenge.

"I think the important thing is for the Democrats to define who they are and to develop a grass-roots organization that isn't dependent on other groups," Gans said.

Still, the power and reach of the blogosphere--the vast universe of Web logs viewed by countless people--is evident in the growing popularity of the Duvalls' site. Already, the couple has been threatened with legal action by one company, which the Duvalls declined to name, that was unhappy with its mention on the site.

Bill Duvall, 59, said the blogosphere promotes the very essence of democracy by giving people a voice who wouldn't normally have one. It provided him and his wife--who are now semiretired--with a prime outlet for

their post-election political expression.

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