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SILENCE ISSUE

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WHAT PRICE PEACE AND QUIET?

More and more companies see silence as a golden business opportunity. By Janet Paskin

IN SEARCH OF SILENCE IN MIDTOWN

Manhattan, I've landed myself head down and knees up, horizontal in a "nap pod." For \$18 and 25 minutes, I'll be covered by a blanket and bathed in low blue light, both of which are supposed to encourage relaxation if not sleep. The benefits are legion, says Nicolas Ronco, the entrepreneur who believes his nap haven, Yelo, could eventually boast 500 outlets. Short term, I should have better focus and more energy; long term, I could lose weight and lower my chances of a heart attack.

All of which is great, but all I really want out of the next half-hour is a break from ringing phones, traffic and the incessant drone of workplace gossip.

The world is noisy; increasingly, if we want quiet, we're willing to pay for it. And with growing success, businesses and industries will sell it. Retreat centres offer silent vacations and hotel chains offer quiet floors; therapists specialize in silent therapy; nap pods, noise-cancellation headphones and earplugs all offer the ability to hush the outside world.

Even real estate developers are finding prospective buyers to be single-minded in the pursuit of silence. As cities and towns become denser, and more and more people swap single-family homes for condos and apartments, "people are getting more sensitive to noise," says Eric Broadhurst, an engineer at Charles M. Salter Associates, a San Francisco-based acoustics-consulting group. Clients recently hired Broadhurst for their 10,000-square-foot Los Angeles penthouse with the following instructions: "We don't want to hear anything."

Perhaps after they move in, they should investigate *A Very Silent Night*, a CD recorded at "a frequency only dogs can hear," which topped the charts in New Zealand at Christmastime.

THOUGH THE MARKET FOR SILENCE IS

hard to measure, anecdotal evidence suggests customers spend millions every year trying to buy peace and quiet. But silence can't be bought—it doesn't exist, either in cities or anywhere else. The natural world is surprisingly loud, to which anyone who's been backpacking can attest. In urban environments, soundproofing can make rooms quiet enough to record a commercial, and sound-masking can minimize the distraction of noise.

Still, there's always something to hear—a gunshot, for example, will reverberate through even the best audio studios (and arguably, it should). The so-called "quietest place on Earth," the echo-free chamber at Minnesota's Orfield Labs (see also page 62), tamps all sound, but visitors find they can still hear their hearts beat and their eardrums vibrate.

It's not a pleasant sensation. Silence, or even extreme quiet, often simply makes us uncomfortable. The silent treatment is a favourite tool of the passive-aggressive. Isolation and enforced quiet are considered effective methods of punishment, from a three-minute trip to the "time out" chair for naughty kids at one end of the spectrum to solitary confinement at the other.

"People are freaked out by pure silence," says Ronco. He spent three days in silence at an ashram, which he described as "the most intense experience of my entire life. I and everyone else went a little crazy."

Such is often the response during silent retreats, offered at meditation centres. At the Insight Meditation Society's Retreat Center in Barre, Massachusetts, students pay up to \$880 to spend a week in silent reflection, yet find it surprisingly stressful. "There's usually a lot of anxiety," says instructor Sharon Salzberg. Students regularly tell her they don't know if they can be silent. To mitigate the anxiety, students are allowed to talk to their teachers, individually or in groups.

Many so-called silent enterprises actually involve a fair bit of talking, or sound. Meditation retreats usually offer guided sessions and lectures, as well as one-on-one instruction. A session of "silence therapy" at the New York-based Asnani Foundation is, it turns out, a conversation about the benefits of silence, plus a prescription for meditation (cost: \$120). Noise-cancellation headphones and sound-masking machines practice a nifty aural subtraction-by-addition, replacing distracting background noise with a soothing drone that gives the impression of quiet.

SO IT'S NOT QUIET FOR ITS OWN SAKE

that sells. It's refuge from noise that can do us physical harm. The vast majority of earplugs and headphones, for example, are sold as protective devices for professionals, to preserve hearing for folks who work in factories, production plants

or busy intersections. When people buy earplugs for personal use, says Tom Bergman, founder of The Ear Plug Super Store, "the No. 1 reason is because of a snoring spouse, followed by students trying to prep for exams." Other reasons include tuning out office noise and trying to sleep in loud apartments, but personal use only makes up about 5 percent of The Ear Plug Super Store's business.

The true detriment of noise? It stresses us out. Literally. Studies have shown repeated exposure to airport noise results in higher levels of cortisol and adrenaline, our stress hormones (see page 52). We may not be aware of the toll noise takes, but we'll lay out cold cash to get rid of it.

Buyers might pay 10 percent more for a house sheltered from street sounds than they would for one in a noisier spot. Same goes for condos, says Broadhurst, the acoustic engineer. "Someone might be willing to spend another \$50,000 to get something they think is going to be quieter. You want to be able to relax and read and not hear the music from the movie that's being watched next door." But even then, engineers and developers are careful not to overpromise: When it comes to the reasons residents sue condo developers, noise is a runner-up only to waterproofing.

With Yelo, Ronco offers refuge that's almost womb-like. People need quiet and isolation—but just a little bit, and in a non-threatening environment. That's partly why Yelo offers massages and reflexology along with nap pods; pure naps only account for about 25 percent of its business. And while \$18 seems a small price to pay for the chance to lie down in the middle of a busy day, Yelo also offers nap enhancements, like an optional scent of berries, figs or mimosas, and a sound-track designed to soothe.

But when I visited, I was hoping for quiet, not wind chimes, so I passed on the music. With only the ambient hum of the heating system to mask the sounds of traffic on 57th Street, I closed my eyes.

Insulated from the hustle-bustle, it was easy to see the potential in businesses like Yelo. As the world gets noisier and busier, we're all likely to pay a little extra for peace and quiet.

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