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The Overwhelmed Shopper

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The overwhelmed shopper

By [Barry Schwartz](#). Published on April 19, 2004.

I had an epiphany while buying jeans a few years ago. Jeans buying for me had always been "waist size, inseam and out the door in two minutes." Jeans simply fit the way they fit, and that's all there was to it. But when I went into the Gap, I encountered more than a half-dozen different varieties of style and fit. There were no "regular" jeans any more.

Suddenly, a two-minute operation had turned into an hour-long project. What's more, though I ended up with a pair of jeans that fit me better than any jeans I had ever worn before, I felt worse about it. What happened to me is that all the options I was given raised my expectations about just how well jeans were supposed to fit. My new jeans fit very well, but they weren't perfect, and I now expected perfect. The result was disappointment. All this choice enabled me to do better, but feel worse.

I began to look around for evidence that it wasn't just me that found that too much choice to have a negative, overloading effect.

And there was plenty of evidence to be found. In researching my new book, "Do We Have Too Many Choices?," I discovered that as options increase among varieties of gourmet jam or chocolate, shoppers are less likely to buy any of them. Twenty-five options attract more attention-but, actually less total purchasing activity-than five.

Similarly, as employers increase the number of investment options provided to employees in 401(k) plans, employees become less likely to participate in any, even though this often means passing up an employer match of several thousand dollars per year.

There is evidence that consumers are also feeling overloaded by health-care marketers, too. Although doctors increasingly insist, as a matter of medical ethics, that their patients choose among treatment plans, patients increasingly report that this is a choice they do not want to make.

essential choices

So while there is no denying that some choice is good-even essential-to well-being and consumer satisfaction, it does not appear that more choice is necessarily better.

In addition, several colleagues and I have found that the problem of choice overload is especially acute for people whose aim is to get the "best" (we call them "maximizers") rather than "good enough" (we call them "satisficers.") The only way to find the best is to examine all the possibilities, which in the cornucopia that is modern America is just impossible.

Maximizers, we find, when faced with extraordinary consumer choice, are less likely to buy, take longer, are less satisfied and more regretful than satisficers. They have extremely high expectations about the results of their decisions, and are often disappointed. More importantly, maximizers are in general less happy, less optimistic, less satisfied with their lives and more depressed than satisficers.

My jeans-buying experience helps explain why overwhelming choice plus the tendency to seek the best can make a devastating combination. Choice increases the work involved in making a decision, so you expect and need a better result to justify that work. It increases the chances you will regret your selection (you just know that one of the rejected alternatives, or an alternative that you didn't have time to consider, must have been better). It raises your expectations about how good the chosen alternative will be. And when your choice (almost inevitably) fails to meet your high expectations, you feel that you have only yourself to blame ("With all this choice, there must have been something perfect out there; I blew it.")

I think this recent research on choice overload and its consequences has several important implications for those marketers who are deciding what products to take to market and how to promote those products.

A wide variety of options (25 jams) attracts people's attention, but it keeps them from actually buying. The same may be true of products that make use of modern digital technology. They may be designed with so many features that each consumer can customize them to do exactly what he or she wants, so that "perfection" is within the grasp of everyone, but the price will be an array of choices that is so bewildering that many shoppers are turned away all together.

diminishing returns

Efforts to promote products that make exaggerated claims that they are the "best" of their kind may encourage shoppers to be maximizers, with the result that no matter how good the products actually are, they will fail to meet expectations and leave consumers disappointed. Suggesting you're selling the "best" may increase one-time buyers, but the resulting disappointment will decrease repeat customers.

And when all the work involved in shopping is combined with the disappointment and regret over the results, the effect will be to decrease the attractiveness of shopping in general (recent studies suggest that only teenage girls still like to shop). We spend money we don't have to buy things we don't need. We bring them home, try them out and experience disappointment. This treadmill of frustration will not continue indefinitely. It's only a matter of time before consumers catch on to how dissatisfied they are with the process and stop.

The time is ripe for someone to take advantage of the processes. The winning marketers in such an environment will be those who can devise simple product lines, without complicated customization options, who take those products to market as "good enough" to meet consumer needs. Advertise in a way that establishes modest expectations, so that consumers will be satisfied, perhaps even pleasantly surprised. The more modest the claims you make for a product, the more satisfied consumers will be.

Simplified products marketed with modest claims will be greeted with a deep sigh of relief by many who have just been overwhelmed by the modern marketplace. This prediction may be at odds both with received wisdom and past experience. But bear in mind that the novelty and variety that served marketers well when choices were few become debilitating when choices are many.

About the author

Barry Schwartz is the Dorwin Cartwright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College and the author of newly published "The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less." (HarperCollins Publishers)

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