

Choices

whether too many or too few, we're not happy about it

Thanks in part to a recent book by Professor Barry Schwarz entitled, "The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less," we're wondering whether there are too many options for consumers today.

And whether all those choices are leading to a general decrease in the American "happiness quotient."



Jerry Gelsomino

A study quoted in *Parade* magazine shows that in the last 30 years, the proportion of the population describing itself as "very happy" has declined by about 5 percent [that's 15 million people]. Even Madonna can't get no satisfaction. The Material Girl told NBC, "I've got everything I want and I'm

still not happy."

Schwarz writes about how difficult it is to buy a pair of jeans or running shoes, based on the selection a shopper is faced with in the stores. In addition, he points out decisions we're forced to make that were pre-selected for us in the past, such as which telephone service provider to use or where to put our retirement investments.

I agree. But I also disagree. I believe that there are examples already in the marketplace where enough choices are *not* available.

Visit any consumer electronics store. You're offered plenty of brands and features from which to choose. However, as the consumers' homes, offices or pockets become filled with "too much stuff," they desire a single device that accomplishes a multitude of functions in the smallest package possible. We're promised a convergence of technology for the next generation of telephones, entertainment equipment and computers, but we still search for that one item that does it all, seamlessly. The delay probably has to do with the inability to determine which of the many features are most

desired in a multi-functional product.

Relating to any discussion of choice, a retailer to watch is Trader Joe's, the Monrovia, Calif.-based food market that is fast emerging as a candidate for America's favorite alternative place for grocery shopping. Most of the items sold at Trader Joe's are private label but, as a fun twist, the company's name is modified for specific ethnic food types – e.g., Trader Giotto's Virgin Olive Oil and Trader Ming's Spring Shu Mai dumplings. While Joe's stores do not offer anywhere near the range of products found in the national chain stores, the company uses in-store signage and product labeling to romance its own product to the point that the shopper doesn't seem to miss a broader array of brands.

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Whether product assortment is wide, or narrowed for strategic reasons, giving customers information they need to know becomes a critical element.

I spent much of last year researching a new monitor that was both Mac- and PC-compatible and switchable between platforms. The quest took me both online and in-store, but I found it consistently difficult to get the product information I needed. Unfortunately, this same deficiency may be found in most product categories sold through the Internet and in real-world shopping. Are those features on jeans just fashion trends, or do they really have a benefit? What advantage does the house brand

offer over the national line, other than price? Which brand of toothpaste in this 50-foot display is right for me? Isn't the manufacturer supposed to clearly define uniqueness and advantages between products? Or maybe the store presentation teams are falling down on their responsibility to communicate the point of difference.

Of course, based on the disappointing 2003 holiday sale season reported by many retailers, the choice of where to shop may soon be academic. For example, where will we all go for toys this year? From KB toys to FAO Schwarz to Toys "R" Us to ToyRama (a West L.A. independent retailer), the list of store closings and chain disappearances will greatly reduce options and increase drive time. It will then be up to those left standing to give the customer the selection and options they are looking for.

Remember how, just a few years back, Skinmarket stores were transforming legions of girls into essential users of their perfume, bath and beauty lines? With their abrupt departure, those loyal customers had to make new store choices.

Retail designers' options are diminishing, as well. Market conditions have caused fixture manufacturers and store equipment and display vendors to shut their doors or consolidate under a single corporate owner. Does the disappearance of a wider array of resources make our choices any easier?

So our future runs the gamut, from too many choices to too few options, either way causing confusion, frustration, inability to make a selection.

What do you think? And, by the way, this is a multiple-choice question. ●

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