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Editor

Option overload

One of the wonders of the modern world is our freedom of choice. Back in the 1900s, options were very much limited; strawberry jam was strawberry jam, and you'd be lucky in some regions if there was even another flavour available. Likewise, TV was TV; and everyone in the country had access to the same four channels (and gradually five, and six, and so on).

Today, all that has changed as manufacturing methods and service providers have been able to ramp up offerings, giving us more things to pay more money for. Now, we can choose our hair colour, our water company, what books we read, which restaurants we frequent. Indeed, in today's world, there are more options than we can count. We can choose from more than 10 suppliers for our home Internet or mobile phone contracts, or more than 100 shops online for clothes, and there are literally thousands of different laptops available for sale at any one time.

A quick glance at your local grocery website shows that there are 375 options under the cereal category, including 17 different types of porridge oats, and 31 different types of muesli. Beyond different flavourings, what's the difference between one plain bag of porridge oats and the next? Do we really need this much choice, or is it possible that there are just too many options?

This 'overchoice' or 'choice overload' is now a recognised cognitive issue, where consumers faced with thousands of choices to make as part of everyday life – which of these 50 different types of chewing gum at the checkout counter is the right chewing gum for me? – is causing major problems for many people. Making a decision on even the simplest choice, such as which breakfast cereal to buy, is causing a great deal of stress for a significant number of people and can even be overwhelming. Additionally, once a decision has been made, there is a higher rate of associated disappointment, with consumers fearing they've made the wrong choice. Put simply, too many options causes the chooser to lose enjoyment in the choosing.

Businesses, manufacturers and service providers should all take heed of the challenge of overchoice. It's all well and good having access to more than 100 TV channels at the switch of a button, but this increased choice has coincided with a new phenomenon – channel hopping. The fear of missing out on something better renders many unable to settle for any one decision for fear of disappointment. Add in other content viewing options, such as the rapidly-growing host of OTT providers and IP-TV channels, and we see an entire generation of consumers rendered unable to make a firm decision, be in any way satisfied by a decision, or show any loyalty to any brand or business – something which is vital for ongoing business opportunities.

Overchoice is a very real, and very 21st Century, phenomenon, which we'll no doubt be seeing the repercussions of in the years to come. ■

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