

IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

CHOICE PARALYSIS

There's a basic assumption that we're more content when we have more choices. In this age of consumer abundance, we have endless fast-food restaurants, innumerable options in toothpaste and cold remedies, and, of course, a bazillion kinds of breakfast cereals. Does this make us happier? I suggest it might not.

Subway is one of my favorite places to grab a sandwich. Despite the number of variations in cold cuts and pre-cooked meats, six breads, eight condiments, and seven vegetables, I have three favorite combinations, and the "Sandwich Artists" really move the line at the busy hour. They're seasoned pros, pun intended. Most of us regulars can stand in line, bark our orders and be on our way with a fresh, satisfying concoction in minutes — if we're ready to order.

The other day, I was standing in line behind two elderly grandparents with four little kids who didn't know what they wanted. Their indecision took an agonizing amount of time. Even though they marched off somewhat content



Too many choices can put customers into buying paralysis

with their lunch, I'm not sure the opportunity to create their own personal culinary art made the kids any happier than they would've been with spartan Happy Meals from McDonalds. Also, Grandma and Grandpa were thoroughly frazzled by the 20 questions required to make the tots happy. Six-inch? Twelve-inch?

Wheat, honey, oat? Nuked or toasted? There were long pauses between each question.

With choice comes responsibility, and some people want as little of that as possible. "What if I got the honey mustard instead of the spicy mustard? It will be my own fault if I don't like it." Notice the best establishments offer light suggestions and "limited" chef's specials. Even at the drive-in they suggest you try one thing. It's a great way to avoid traffic-jamming, deer-in-the-headlights indecisiveness, let alone blow out slower-moving inventory.

Threatened by the infinite opportunity of Internet retail, we fall into the trap of thinking we need to offer more in our stores. I dare say that's the opposite of where we dare go. The classic three-tier good-better-best rings true more than ever, and believe it or not, you are more often doing your customer a favor keeping additional choices invisible. Granted, stock needs to be well-calculated and researched. But I suggest that a local retailer's ultimate success comes by how well store buyers manage this inventory-

screening process.

Have you ever seen a customer who's on the verge of a buying decision become paralyzed because a new option was introduced? This is a common salesperson's nightmare, especially one who's arrogant in the course of upselling. The salesperson ends up completely unraveling the established safety net — the item the customer felt at ease with. A greater sin is mentioning inventory that's not on hand or an unavailable competitive product. Surely, you have some of these types in your store: "Out of the nine chromatic tuners I just showed you, my favorite is the one that's on backorder." (Owner in back room tears out his hair by the roots.)

People want choice, but they don't want to be responsible for being wrong. Limiting alternatives to a smart selection makes lives easier and liberates customers. Streamlining not only reduces inventory costs and focuses staff but, ultimately, better serves your customers. **MI**

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