

The Paradox of Choice

This summary is about “The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less” by Barry Schwartz. ISBN 0-06-000568-8. <http://www.amazon.com/Paradox-Choice-Barry-Schwartz-ebook/dp/B000TDGGVU/>.

At its core, the author and the book talk about how too many choices are not really a benefit to people and do not result in increased happiness. It is a pretty good and readable book. It gets a little diverse in the middle and like many a bit long for the points it is trying to make.

The author argues that we would be better off if:

1. We allowed constraints on our freedom of choice.
2. We sought ‘good enough’ instead of striving for ‘the best’.
3. We lowered our expectations about the results of our decisions.
4. We did not allow our decisions to be reversed.
5. We paid less attention to what others around us were doing.

As the author points out, this is opposition to the culture and mantra of current western civilization. He talks variously about walking into clothing stores or grocery stores and the challenges we face with the hundreds of choices for any one item. And the Internet has compounded the problem. The same challenges appear in entertainment, communication, religion, education, finances, insurance, etc. The volume of choices and difficulty navigating them grows when we shop online. I believe we can all relate to the choice overload. This even extends to choosing ‘who we want to be’.

The author talks about how culturally sanctified ‘freedom of choice’ is for us. Coupled with the breadth of products and services and the massive amount of marketing (and product placement), we are forced to have massive numbers of choices about what we want and need in our daily lives. And each of these consumes time... and often adds stress. He points out the trend of ‘simplifying your life’ as a means to counteract the stress of choice.

To make a decision the author posits that you:

1. figure out your goals
2. evaluate the importance of the goals
3. create a set of options
4. evaluate how each option will meet the goals
5. pick the winning option
6. use the consequences to modify your goals, their importance, evaluation process

The book discusses how people have poor processes, perceptions, and herd behavior which all impact our choices. The middle of the book talks about deciding/choosing, searching for the best,

choice/happiness, missed opportunities (opportunity cost), regret, disappointment, adaptation, and comparison. There is a lot of good information in this middle, but I didn't think it was overly well put together.

The author has a view that people fall on a scale of maximizers or satisficers... Note that maximizers are more susceptible to 'buyer's remorse'. The author talks about how all this choice has a negative impact on happiness and satisfaction. Most of us want choice, but end up not being happier for it.

Towards the end of the book, he talks about how to deal with the paradox of choice. His main prescriptions are:

1. choose when to choose (we need choice, but be conscious of when we need it)
2. be a chooser and not a picker (out of choice exhaustion, you just pick one)
3. satisfice more and maximize less
4. think about the opportunity costs
5. make your decisions nonreversible (just move on)
6. practice an attitude of gratitude
7. regret less
8. anticipate adaption
9. control expectations
10. curtail social comparison (keeping up with the Joneses)
11. learn to love constraints

Many of these are very appropriate and good... Others are, well, if not trite, at least a challenging request for people to change their behaviors.

All of this matters for business purposes... From research, customers exposed to a limited range of choices purchased significantly more frequently than when exposed to a wide range of choices. Providing a good and limited set of choices will yield better business results.