

COACH *Notes*



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Newsletter

Freedom—or Burden of Choice?

Everyday decisions have become increasingly complex due to the overwhelming abundance of choice with which we are presented. A trip to a typical supermarket reveals enormous choices such as 85 different crackers, 285 types of cookies, 230 varieties of canned soup, 80 different pain relievers, and 360 kinds of shampoo. Does this improve the quality of our lives?

American culture was founded on freedom of choice. A free market economy means that more options should result in better satisfaction for customers and improved products and services. But if the number and variety of choices means more time and effort involved in making even the most basic decisions on how to live and work, then we are creating more problems than we are solving.

The problem is not just American, although it has flourished in U.S. culture. Global companies implanting themselves into developing countries bring with them more choices to consumers. All European and many Asian countries now have mega supermarkets, and choices of telephone services and television programs are increasing with decentralization of government controls. Mexico, which has long been seen as less developed than its neighbors to the north, now has huge superstores such as Wal-Mart and Costco as well as car dealerships, fast food franchises, and a proliferation of its own national supermarkets, appliance outlets, and pharmacy chains.

Choice Overload

The problem of escalating choices and decision dilemmas is not American. It is flourishing internationally. While freedom of choice is a good thing, we are discovering that it has a limit. There is a point at which it becomes a burden.

Excessive choice brings choice overload. It can make you question your decisions before you make them. It requires you to do consumer research and survey other consumers. Even after making a realistic investigation of different options, having too many choices can set you up to have expectations too high for satisfaction.

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“Turning potential into performance”

David Herdlinger, Herdlinger Associates

Dreamers Welcome

At Herdlinger Associates, I encourage people to dream. And the positive results have been astounding!

When individuals pursue their dreams, their lives percolate with purpose, passion, success, and fulfillment.

As a coach, I don't try to make my clients' dreams come true. That's their privilege...and responsibility.

My role – and my joy – is to stand by their side to encourage, guide, challenge, and cheer them on.

Are your dreams big enough? Let me help you unleash your potential and accomplish more than you ever dreamed possible.

...David Herdlinger

HERDLINGER ASSOCIATES has helped thousands of professionals at all levels in all types of organizations achieve extraordinary success and satisfaction.

We serve clients in North America, Europe, and Asia, ranging in size from individuals and very small businesses to corporations with annual sales in excess of \$40 billion.

Learn more about HerdlingerAssociates at our website:
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It can make you blame yourself for failures and causes buyer's remorse.

It is not only products and services purchases that present too many choices, but also major lifestyle choices. For Americans, the problems are worse precisely because they are not bound by traditions. Consider these lifestyle decisions:

Religion	Retirement Plans
Love/Marriage	Political Beliefs
Social Groups/Activities	Appearances/ Dress
Sports/ Exercise	Nutritional Habits
Education	Family Ties
Career Paths	

Too Much Freedom Brings Less Freedom

In the book *The Paradox of Choice* (2004), Barry Schwartz says it well:

Freedom of choice is essential to self-respect, public participation, mobility, and nourishment, but not all choice enhances freedom. Increased choice among goods and services may contribute little or nothing to the kind of freedom that counts. Indeed, it may impair freedom by taking time and energy we'd be better off devoting to other matters.

As choices expand, people are feeling less and less satisfied. It is an error to equate liberty with quantity of choices. We do not necessarily increase freedom when we increase the number of options available.

According to Schwartz, we make the most of our freedoms by learning to make good choices about the things that matter while unburdening ourselves from too much concern about the things that don't.

Here are a few of his suggestions:

1. We would be better off if we embrace certain voluntary constraints on our freedom of choice instead of rebelling against all constraints.
2. We might be better off seeking what is "good enough" instead of seeking out the best.
3. We will be better off if we lower our expectations about the results of decisions.
4. We would be better off if we paid less attention to what others were doing or what they were acquiring.

Are More Choices Good for Sales?

In a study set in a gourmet food store, consumers bought 10 times more when they were offered 5

tastes at a sampling table than when offered a choice of 30 samples.

In another study, students sampling chocolates were offered either cash or the box of chocolates after tasting varieties. Students faced with a smaller array of samples were more satisfied with their tasting than those faced with more varieties. In addition, they were four times more likely to choose the chocolate rather than the cash.

This raises the question, why can't people just ignore many or some of the options and treat a 30-option array as if it were a 5-option array? The large body of research on buying habits and decision-making processes are somewhat complicated. What is most important is that people don't realize that too many choices are actually a problem, not an advantage.

The Downside of Choice

When people have no choice, life is unbearable. As the number of choices increases as it has in our consumer culture and in free market societies, there is a positive and powerful increase in autonomy, control, and liberation. But as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects begin to appear. There is an increase in stress, decision-making dilemmas, anxiety, fears, disappointments, and even clinical depression.

In a study of 20 developed Western nations and Japan, those nations whose citizens value personal freedom and control the most tend to have the highest suicide rates.

The experience of choice as a burden rather than a privilege is complex. While choice is valuable, like most values, an excess is defeating the very value we honor. Excess choice leads to rising expectations, the complexities of decision making, regret, self-blame, and the tendency to engage in social comparisons.

The Way Out

Awareness of the problem requires that we change our previous assumption that more is better, that more choice leads to better decisions, and that more freedom liberates us. This is the paradox we face.

There are some important steps to take back control and freedom that is being sapped by an overabundance of choices. Talking decisions over with a trusted peer or professional coach can help reduce anxiety. Learning to adopt an attitude of "good enough" may require a major shift in beliefs, and this is difficult to do alone.

In part two of this series of articles about choice, we will discuss more steps to deal with choice overload.