



Adlines

INFORMATION & TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

Decisions, Decisions... When Less Is More

If you asked most of your customers whether they want you to offer them more options or fewer, they would tell you they want to have *your* product *their* way, so give them a lot of choices. They'd be wrong.

In his book, *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz says, "People choose not on the basis of what's most important, but on what's easiest to evaluate."

Although common sense would suggest that we would all like the freedom to choose, that we would all prefer to buy things that are tailored to our own individual tastes and preferences, the reality is that the vast majority of us just want options that are easy to understand and evaluate – quickly.

It probably has something to do with the fact that, in our increasingly complex and information-saturated world, we are faced with hundreds of small and large decisions every day. It's easy for decision fatigue to set in. We don't have the time or the ambition to do the research or mental arithmetic necessary for an enlightened decision on everything.

To illustrate the point about limiting options: a recent study found that only 5% of Microsoft Word users changed the default settings, although dozens of options are available to customize the program to individual preferences. The majority of people don't want to tweak, they don't want to choose, they just want to use.

Obviously not all products lend themselves to this concept of limited choice but, as Albert Einstein said, "*Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler.*" If the decision to buy your products can be made simple – present it that way. If your product is too complex or customized for a quick, easy decision, try breaking the evaluation process down into manageable steps that will guide your buyer to an easier decision. This simplified decision-making process can take many forms.

On the retail sales floor

Train your staff to ask a few targeted questions that will help them guide customers past the rows and rows of options to the handful that will make their choice easier. Don't ask open-ended questions but always leave at least the illusion of choice. "This yellow model is one of our top sellers but the green and red ones are pretty popular too." Prominently



feature a very few "Specials" or "Customer Picks" to make the obvious choices more obvious.

In print ads

Don't clutter up the space with a mess of unrelated offerings and don't try to spell out all the features and options in your limited space. You know which options are most popular – focus on those. We tend to take the path of least resistance. Simplify your message so people can easily understand why they should buy your product from you.

On your website

Don't try to tell all on the home page. Viewers will be overwhelmed and the back button will become their simplest choice. The web is the perfect vehicle for delivering step-by-step information in as much or as little detail as your prospect is ready to receive. But too many options too early in the process will dissuade them rather than persuade them. Resist the temptation to provide top-level links to lots of pages to "make it easier" for them. It won't. Instead, lead them to primary areas and, if necessary, present a few more choices when they get there.

A clear understanding of the psychology of decision-making is why companies like Apple are so successful. One of the first things Steve Jobs did when he returned to Apple was to rationalize their product line. Look at their choices (or rather lack of choices). Each product line offers two or three

models and very few options for customization. When deciding on which iPhone you should buy, you can either get it in black or white and three different memory options. Not a lot of decisions to be made, right? And how is Apple doing? Of course, backing up the implied promise is critical. Only if your product is great in the first place can you afford to limit choice.

You would think that more choices would be "freeing", and many people would say that they prefer dozens or hundreds of options, but the reality (and user testing bears this out) is that people tire quickly from having to weed through all those options. They may feel pressure from trying to find the elusive "perfect fit". In the end, they are just as likely to make no decision at all.

Try asking a group of friends, "where do you want to have lunch?" or "what movie do you want to see?" It always seems to come back to one member of the group making a suggestion and most will simply agree. Not having to come up with all the decisions is, in fact, freeing for most people.

Einstein also said, "*Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex... It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage – to move in the opposite direction.*"

Faced with decision fatigue everywhere we turn, perhaps less really *will* get you more.