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Good Enough

Could you imagine the US Army attempting to get recruits by saying “Be good enough” instead of “Be all that you can be?” Or a car dealership trying to attract customers by advertising that you can get a “good enough deal?” As consumers and decision-makers, we typically are socialized and inclined to look for the best deal and make the best choice. However, it appears that there are ways in which “good enough” may be better for us.

Barry Schwartz of Swarthmore College has done some provocative investigation of the personal and emotional costs associated with having too many options and habitually attempting to make the “best” choice. In his book, The Paradox of Choice, he uses the term “maximizer” for the person who seeks and accepts only the best, whereas a “satisficer” is one who accepts good enough. Compared to “satisficers,” “maximizers” tend to experience less happiness, less optimism, less satisfaction with life, lower self esteem, more regret, more perfectionism, and more depression. Maximizers typically feel compelled to do an exhaustive search for the best, have high (perhaps unrealistic) expectations about their choice, endeavor to make a decision that will result in no regrets, and subsequently discover that something about their decision wasn’t the best. On the other hand, satisficers have standards for what is acceptable or “good enough,” and tend to be satisfied when they find an option or decision that is “good enough.”

Suppose you want to buy a new television set. You can choose among direct-view, HDTV, projection, LCD, plasma, DLP, LCOS, handheld, etc. (and then one can consider size, intended use, brand, etc.) --- you get the picture! Having a choice about something gives us a sense of control (a good thing), but feeling that we have to make the best choice among an overwhelming number of options can paradoxically result in feeling out of control, and lead to poorer well-being.

Obviously, maximizing and satisficing are on a continuum as most people do some of both. Maximizing has its place because there are certainly times when we do want or need to make the best possible choice. Schwartz, however, would encourage us to satisfice more and be selective about when we maximize.

I could continue editing this newsletter until it is the best I can do, but rather I will stop here because I think it is "good enough." I hope it is "good enough" for you to think about how you approach consumer decisions as well as other choices in your life.

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