

Freedom to choose makes consumers happy, and it's easy to attain

Choice overload can leave customers frozen with indecision, but a reminder that they are free to choose what they want can transform the situation.



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Retailers: would you like to increase customer satisfaction with just a simple sign on the shopfloor or a pop-up on your web shop? New research from IESE suggests you can.

Professor [Elena Reutskaja](#), who has previously written about the phenomenon of [choice overload](#), in which people are overwhelmed when faced with too many options, returns to the subject of choice in [this research](#) with Barbara Fasolo of the London School of Economics and Raffaella Misuraca of the University of Palermo.

Here, the focus is on consumer satisfaction, which can be difficult to maintain when there is an abundance of choice. What should retailers do when a product or service naturally lends itself to a large range of choices, but that very [abundance risks overwhelming the customer](#)?

Traditional solutions have focused on reducing the number to choose from, which can backfire by resulting in less traffic; or displaying offers or recommendations to focus consumer attention, but this can be to the detriment of those products not highlighted.

Instead, Reutskaja takes as a starting point research that shows consumers value freedom and autonomy, which can improve motivation, enhance well-being and increase satisfaction. Better yet, a relatively simple action can fulfill — rather than frustrate — consumers' search for autonomy while shopping.

Feel free: how simple “freedom cues” can transform the shopping experience

The co-authors conducted a field experiment in a basketball supply store in Italy and later reproduced the results in a more controlled online setting: an e-commerce web shop selling face masks.

In the physical store, they placed signs around the space reminding customers that they could “choose as much as they wished” on some weeks, and didn't place signage on others. They then collected brief surveys from consumers to assess their satisfaction with the shopping trip as a whole.

In the online setting, some users received a pop-up instructing them to “shop as they would in a real online store,” while others received the message, “You are free to browse and select as many models and quantities of reusable face masks as you wish.” This latter was referred to as a “freedom cue,” and serves to reinforce a customer's autonomy — in their own mind at least.

The online experiment also used [mouse tracking](#) to measure exactly how consumer behavior differed between the two groups. Mouse tracking gathers data from the user's mouse

movements as they click or scroll through a webpage.

The results of both experiments showed that customers who were reminded of their freedom to choose expressed higher satisfaction. Moreover, the mouse tracking produced some insights that would be difficult or impossible to gather in the real world: namely, that “free” users spent more time on the products they ended up choosing (therefore, the products they liked) and less on those they rejected, relative to the users who weren’t nudged toward autonomous thinking, who spent more time clicking through items they didn’t choose.

The basic need for autonomy for psychological well-being has been established across a range of areas, including education and healthcare. Now, this research confirms that it also extends to consumer choice.

“These results show that it is possible to boost consumer satisfaction and customer experience by simple and cheap interventions that retailers or service providers can create on their own,” says Reutskaja. “This matters because increasing satisfaction can, medium- to long-term, significantly improve an organization’s ability to differentiate its business from others, enhance future performance and strengthen customer loyalty.”

Many traditional interventions to overcome choice overload by focusing consumer attention actually threaten customers’ need for autonomy. Reminding them they are free to choose can be a win for both customers and businesses.



Elena Reutskaja

Professor in the Marketing Department at IESE. She is an expert in decision-making, choice architecture and behavioral insights.

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