

*Management Briefing:*  
**Who says we have freedom of choice?**  
Bernice Hurst, Fine Food Network

It's part of the modern myth. We vote with our feet and our purses. If we don't like a product, we don't buy it. If we don't like a store, we don't shop there. What could be simpler?

Quite a lot, is the short answer. Without differentiation, there is no choice. And one thing of which we are desperately short nowadays is differentiation.

Aisles are lined with shelves filled with countless variations on a theme, offering more choice than any sensible person can absorb in a single shopping trip. New products are added weekly, along with more information on labels. Sizes, shapes and contents overwhelm in a life where shopping, choosing and preparing meals for the family could easily become a full time occupation.

Does anyone really know what criteria to use when choosing a brand? Is any individual capable of remembering, during the stress and pressure of the average shopping trip, the different criteria for each and every product they need to buy? And whose advice do you take when determining your own, personal, criteria?

Judgements based on price, value (which is a different matter), familiarity or brand loyalty (in turn based frequently on marketing and recommendation rather than personal experience) are generally recognised as first level. Quality, traceability, reliability run a distant second level. All things being equal, a quick glance at the shelves and the labels would tell us everything we need to know. But few people find the concept of a level playing field anything other than laughable in a free market. After all, what is the point of competition if not to sell your product for being better in some way than everyone else's?

To paraphrase a president from way back in the century before last, you can please all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time but you really can't please all of the people all of the time. Retailers cannot be all things to all people; not even Wal-Mart can boast enough SKUs to meet the every day demands of every current and prospective shopper.

Which is not to say that they don't try. Packaging and new product development are the twin paths to profit for food manufacturers. While new flavours and ingredients are being tried and tested in the lab, kitchen and focus groups, new pack designs for existing winners can keep shelf space warmed up until they get there. Introducing variations in packaging to accommodate convenience, portability, larger or smaller portions etc can often create new markets from customers whose peripheral vision didn't even register earlier incarnations.

And yet, and yet, there is a school of thought leaning towards the theory of saturation. There are some who realise that there is a limit to the barrage consumer senses can accept before they simply switch off.

J. Walker Smith, president of researchers Yankelovich Partners, speaking at the IRI summit on Reinventing CPG, highlighted a decline in productivity occurring in spite of the fact that there are more messages in the marketplace than ever before. Part of the problem, he said, is that consumers are beginning to feel a "claustrophobia of abundance", preferring fewer options from which to make choices. In one test, the company set up two tables, one with six jars of jam, the other with 24 jars. While 60 per cent of consumers stopped at the table with the greater number of samples, as opposed to 40 per cent who stopped at the lesser selection, 30 per cent bought one of the six jams, while just three per cent bought from the broader selection.

Meanwhile, *USA Today* reported that Americans are becoming increasingly selective eaters, wanting the foods they eat "their way". Shades of Sally meeting Harry.

"Food giants no longer determine America's eating habits; consumers do," the paper reported. "This reality is causing foodmakers, restaurants and grocers to rethink the way they develop, market and display food. In a country that spends \$900 billion annually on food, there's fat incentive to get it right."

To meet demand, companies like Starbucks have allegedly created some 19,000 variations on the way they serve coffee, including five kinds of milk to stir into it. Ten years ago, Tropicana had two kinds of orange juice; today it has two dozen, offering a choice of high, medium and low pulp. Frito-Lay now covers a little of everything with no less than 24 versions of its Lay's Potato Chip brand: Wavy Lay's, Flat Lay's, Baked Lay's, Lay's Crisps. Even Lay's with jalapeño flavoring.

"It's a rejection of mass society," Ron Shaich, CEO of Panera Bread, told *USA Today* while Dennis Lombardi of researcher Technomics told the paper that "The American consumer went from being 'buyer beware' to 'buyer aware'."

But is there really as much choice as would appear at first sight? Information overload may, in fact, be reducing our level of choice. What really sits on the shelves is the same product in myriad packages.

Volume camouflages a true dearth of choice. Having 57 varieties of the same old same old actually disguises an absence of choice. Packaging, rather than content, defines differentiation. Appearance, and presentation, distract from considerations of what is under (or inside) the surface. Talk about metaphors for 21<sup>st</sup> century society. All of life lies in the eye of the beholder.

The precise cost of choice includes the costs of packaging and logistics. In order to provide a range of sizes and shapes, products that are "in season" twelve months of the year and ready meals based on a range of cuisines, food is processed and packaged in whatever form someone at headquarters thinks might appeal to customers.

A recent report by the Liberal Democrat party in the UK found that around one-sixth of the average household's food budget is spent on packaging. Multiply this up for countries with larger populations and you could be forgiven for thinking that food is processed and packaged beyond the point of destruction. Landfill sites full of non-biodegradable materials are overflowing. The hottest competition in the industry now

is to devise new forms of packaging that will self-destruct without further scarring the landscape or de-stabilising the environment.

Profound differences of opinion divide the United States and Europe, for example, about how consumers make their choices. Transparency is a touchy, and flexible, issue. Providing clear, explicit information so that shoppers can genuinely choose what they want to buy is far more complicated than simply loading shelves until they groan under the weight of what manufacturers and retailers insist comprises choice. Substituting quantity for quality will not suffice for much longer.

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The **Fine Food Network** is a consultancy, devised and developed by food writer, Bernice Hurst, working with consumers, producers and retailers to make high quality food readily and widely accessible to as broad an audience as possible. Focusing on both production and ways in which quality can be made compatible with modern time-pressured lifestyles, the Fine Food Network links people who believe in what they are doing to people who appreciate what they are eating.