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Consumer Remorse: Difficult Choices Can Lead to Second-Guessing

Consumers who choose between two good product options build a “positivity bubble” to justify their choices. But according to a new study in the Journal of Consumer Research, that bubble is easy to burst.

“From routine cereal-aisle shopping to expensive big-ticket purchases, consumers are often free to choose among many similarly attractive options,” write authors Ab Litt and Zakary L. Tormala (Stanford University). “In these contexts, it can be difficult to resolve one’s preferences to arrive at a purchasing decision.”

When decisions are difficult because the choices are equally appealing, people often become more positive in their attitudes and behaviors toward their chosen option after they choose it but, the authors found that this enhancement of a product is surprisingly fragile, and collapses easily in the face of even minor negative information about it.

“We show that the process is more like inflating a ‘positivity bubble,’ where there’s an appearance of strong positive attitudes, but which masks a heightened vulnerability to ultimately collapsing,” the authors write.

In three experiments, the researchers asked consumers to make easy or difficult decisions to select one of two products (digital cameras or car stereos). Easy decisions

were between a liked and disliked option, based on participants’ earlier ranking of products. Difficult decisions were between two options that were ranked and liked similarly in that earlier stage.

“Difficult decision scenarios with heightened stakes -- such as shopping for expensive durable goods, choosing a gift for a loved one, or choosing a job, college, or house -- are precisely those in which people would most hope to have accurate and stable attitudes,” the authors write. “Perversely, our results suggest that in these cases their attitudes might actually be the most fragile and bubble-like, appearing strong but actually quite vulnerable to collapse.”

“For consumers, our results suggest that the motivation to enhance and build up products chosen with difficulty (especially in important decisions) might boost happiness with them in the short term, but carry the risk of even greater dissatisfaction over time and experience.” the authors conclude.

Source: Journal of Consumer Research, 2010