

Too many choices

Joe Ferullo | Jun. 24, 2009 NCR Today

My wife is not sleeping lately. She is up late, on the computer, worrying about -- toilets. I'll explain in a second, but let me just say that after years of listening to U.S. Catholic bishops and theologians and the pope himself go on about the downsides of Western consumerism, I get it. I really get it.

Here's what is going on: my wife and I recently bought an old house, a fixer-upper that we are now fixing up. According to the scores of home remodeling magazines somehow still publishing in the midst of a housing collapse of unimagined proportions, our situation is close to consumerist nirvana. Through this kind of total remodel, we can have the house of our dreams. We can have everything "just the way we want it."

But what if you can decide what you want? What if the dazzling array of choices offered about American marketing leaves you paralyzed?

That's what is happening with my wife, Sylvia. The contractor tells her she needs to choose fixtures and toilets for the bathrooms right away. So she logs on to, say, the [Kohler toilet web site](#) [1]. There she finds literally hundreds of toilet options. There are two-piece toilets, uni-body toilets, low-flow toilets, even something called "Class Six Toilets" -- which sounds to me like a line out of "Dr. Strangelove." Within these choices are more choices: colors that are neutral, warm or cool. Toilet heights that are "standard" or "comfort height." Seriously.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz famously addressed all of this in his book, *The Paradox of Choice* [2]. In it, Schwartz argues that Western society's belief in unlimited choice as the path to individual freedom has reached its illogical conclusion. We are offered so many choices of so many things -- with the differences between choices so miniscule -- that we are paralyzed, frozen in the face of these overwhelming options. We are the very opposite of free.

In a videotaped [web lecture series](#) [3], Schwartz calls this kind of choice and the emphasis it places on unlimited individual freedom "the official dogma of western industrialized society." He notes the 175 salad dressings spread out across the shelves of his local supermarket -- a waste of time, energy and resources in a world where so many do without any food at all. Perhaps, in that world, fifty -- maybe even 40 -- salad dressings would be plenty of choice?

And this choice makes us no happier, Schwartz says. Once we work to break the paralysis and actually make a choice -- we then fret endlessly about whether we made the right choice. We are made miserable by our variety of choices. This is exactly what keeps my wife up at night.

We are buying toilets -- and, as you know, toilets last pretty much forever. So, if we pick the wrong toilets, well, we're stuck. For decades. Each morning, year-after-year, we will literally stare down at our mistake, and sigh in uncertain regret.

I'm not sure which toilets Sylvia has picked -- I left her to cope all by herself. I couldn't take the pressure. I'll find out when the contractor starts working on the bathrooms, in a few weeks or so. In the meantime, I think

about [Pope Benedict's Christmas message in 2007](#) [4]. Christmas messages are always filled with warnings about Western materialism, of course, and in 2007, Benedict talked about the "dead-end streets of consumerism."

I'm living on that dead-end street right now. In a fixer-upper. Filled with hundreds of toilets.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.us.kohler.com/onlinecatalog/selector/selector.jsp>

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Paradox_of_Choice

[3] http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice.html

[4] <http://www.newser.com/story/13667/pope-rips-christmas-materialism.html>