

# Spoilt for choice

Wait a minute. I'm still tabulating the results. Hold on. I'm using an abacus . . . Yes now I have it. I had ZERO responses to my last column, in which I looked for support to build a consensus for more ethics among the direct marketing fraternity.

I'm surprised. My more cynical advisors were not and think I'm an idiot for even holding out hope for any show of support.

On to the next topic.

Good news for those direct marketers who use direct mail to educate, hoping this leads to an 'informed buying decision' on the part of their target audience.

Marketing in general and the choice of really the same product(s) in various forms, has gotten completely out of hand. Consumers are confused and really fed up with this. Well, at least I am. Sometimes, too many choices is NOT a good thing.

## Why do I think this?

Isn't limitless choice a sign of an advanced consumer society?

Or is it that the consumer is, quite unwittingly, caught in the middle of a fierce war for territory being fought by rival purveyors for retail shelf space. The more space a purveyor has on a retail shelf, the more likely it is that the customer will be drawn to their products. And, just as important, it means less space is available for competitive products.

So, to fight for maximum space, they have to find a way to fill the space. Better to fill it with endless varieties of the same product than to let some upstart smaller producer get shelf space.

Of course, this works to limit the real choices we as

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consumers have with our spending dollars. Instead of being able to choose among a dozen brands in many categories, many stores offer 90-plus per cent of their space to just two.

Is this really a choice?

Hold on. I have to run out to the grocery store to get a few things. Back in awhile . . .

OK I'm back.

I went out to buy some milk, crackers, toothpaste and oatmeal. In a normal environment, this procedure would have taken ten minutes as I know which aisles all these items are located in. Plus, we have computerised check-out so no lines; no humans to screw things up.

But, here's the problem . . .

## Crackers: Aisle 2

I went to buy a box of Wheat Thins. Just the regular original Wheat Thins.

Where are they hiding?

I had to look through the following flavours: cream cheese and chives, ranch, parmesan and basil, garden herb, reduced fat, multigrain, hint of salt, plus two flavours of 'artisan style' and three varieties of Wheat Thins Toasted Chips.

Ten flavours plus the chips.

## Oatmeal is next in Aisle 3

Quaker Oats seems to rule although there is some room for my favourite McCanns of Ireland and a few local artisan brands plus the generic store brand.

Flavours: two in Regular which involve cooking for a whole five minutes. In instant: original, cinnamon roll, cinnamon and spice, dinosaur eggs (either to appeal to kids or snakes), raisins and spice, low-sugar maple and brown

sugar (figure that one out), low-sugar apples and cinnamon, weight control maple and brown sugar, weight control cinnamon, variety pack, two flavours of high fibre, three flavours of express single servings and two flavours of oatmeal-to-go bars.

## Pantene shampoo. Aisle 11

I don't use shampoo as it is too drying. I use a natural soap made by a local producer from goat milk and herbs. But, for comparison . . . here are the varieties - plus, all these come in different sizes and at least two different style bottles which more than doubles the shelf space requirement: smooth, moisture renewal, beautiful lengths, classic care, volume, full and thick, colour revival, ice shine, nature fusion.

## Toothpaste: Aisle 12

Colgate and Crest rule here.

Colgate has: advanced clean, clean mint, whitening, enamel strength, sensitive enamel protection, sensitive whitening, tartar control whitening, cavity protection, whitening oxy bubbles, oxy bubbles mint, luminous, sparkling white, sparkling white mint, sparkling white cinnamon, mint stripe, clean mint, maximum white, maximum white with breath strips: 18 choices.

Crest had as many 'choices'. This leaves room for one other minor player plus a local hippy-style health-orientated producer.

## Half a pound of sliced turkey

After all this, I got kind of hungry so I went over to the deli counter to get a half pound of sliced turkey. I just wanted the store brand, which is quite good. But I can't just ask for the store brand anymore - now I'm asked

On a visit to his local supermarket, **DOUG SACKS** becomes a victim of marketers' Shelf Space Wars.

if I want: low-salt, honey roasted, plain roasted, regular, or peppercorn. And did I want that shaved or slivered or sliced thin, medium, or thick?

## Bread for the sandwich

Now for some bread so I can make a sandwich. I'll stick to one brand: Pepperidge Farm, which is made in Connecticut.

Like toothpaste, there are two major brands here that dominate 90 per cent of the bread aisle.

I prefer the soft oatmeal.

My health-conscious daughters like the wholewheat. My son likes the oatmeal, too. My wife likes pumpernickel.

Other choices include: hearty white, multi-grain, 15 grain, seven grain, (easier on the colon than 15 grain, I guess), soft honey wholewheat, rye and pumpernickel, Jewish rye, seedless Jewish rye, soft wheat, German dark wheat, cinnamon and raisin, cinnamon (without the raisins): 15 choices. And those are just the flavours for the basic style.

There are also flavours for: 100 per cent natural (makes you wonder what's in the other bread), Light Style and Carb Style.

## Getting thirsty

Time for some milk. Start with the basics: fat free, low fat - one per cent, two per cent - and whole milk. Also, organic fat free, reduced fat and whole milk, plus lactose free. In the soy milks there are: original, light, vanilla, vanilla light, chocolate, chocolate light, heart health and brain & bone health.

Every time I go to the grocery store it takes me twice as long as expected, I spend

twice as much and invariably I go home with the wrong thing because I didn't see the fine print listing it as fat free, salt free, sugar free or diet.

Or, I bought the mint stripes instead of the clean mint.

Sometimes I space out entirely and come home with the oxy bubbles with mint . . . or sparkling white mint.

## All washed out

This is not just a problem confined to grocery stores. Anyone buy a pair of jeans within the last decade?

You need an advanced degree.

Not exactly what old Levi Strauss had in mind when he began cutting and sewing denim into trousers for gold miners. I never realised there were so many shades of washed-out blue. Once upon a time they were all navy blue and you had to wash them 50 times for them to lighten and shrink to fit the contours of your body.

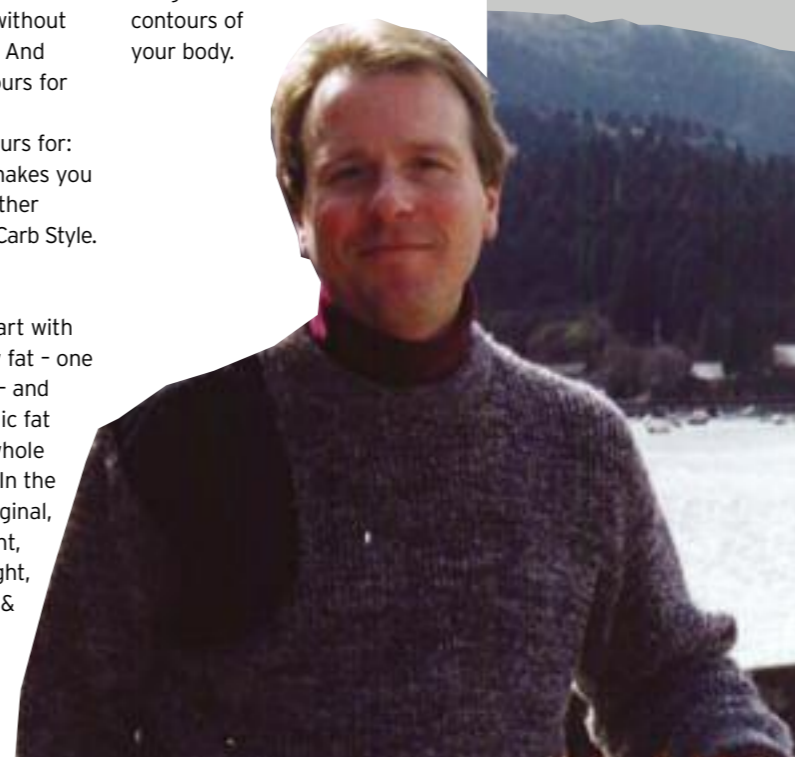
Is the consumer caught in the middle of a fierce war for territory being fought by rival purveyors?

Now there are a dozen shades of light blue in-pre-washed, stone-washed, or pre-shrunk.

Styles include: original, regular, relaxed (for baby boomers), comfort (for even older boomers), straight leg, relaxed straight, slim straight, boot, slim boot, relaxed boot, skinny, super skinny (supermodels only), loose straight, super baggy and welder jeans.

After all that, you finally find the perfect colour and style combination, then realise it's a button fly, not a zipper. Which is OK when you're 19 but not so practical after 40 or 50.

And as for the huge selection of trainers . . .



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