THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHOICE

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Welcome to a huge resource on the psychology of choice.

Each day, you make hundreds — if not thousands — of choices. This article explains the subconscious factors that guide those decisions.

If you’re a marketer, you’ll learn how to apply that information so that customers...

- **Choose an option** (e.g., add to cart)
- **Choose a desired option** (e.g., high ROI product)
- **Enjoy their option** (e.g., purchase again)
STEP 1: RECOGNIZE A WANT OR NEED

The first stage is problem recognition.

In technical terms, people discover that their actual state is worse than their ideal state (Bruner & Pomazal, 1988).

REDUCE THE GUILT OF HEDONIC NEEDS

Needs can fall into two categories:
All else equal, we gravitate toward utilitarian options.

Why? We feel guilty when we consume hedonic products ([Okada, 2005](#)).

If you want people to choose a hedonic option, you need to prevent or reduce that guilt. And here’s how...

**TACTIC: SEPARATE HEDONIC OPTIONS FROM UTILITARIAN OPTIONS**

Is your option hedonic? Then remove all nearby utilitarian options.

When people are choosing an option, they compare it to other options within a choice set. If they compare a hedonic option to a utilitarian option, they’ll feel guilty choosing the hedonic option ([Okada, 2005](#)).

How could you separate them? For one, you could present items sequentially (i.e., show one item at a time):
Sequential presentations reduce intergroup comparisons:

“...the absence of an explicit comparison in [a sequential presentation] makes it easier to create justifications for the hedonic alternative. In contrast, when multiple alternatives are presented together, each one is evaluated in comparison with the others...”  
(Okada, 2005, pp. 45)

Here are some other ideas...

- If you’re a RETAILER, you could put hedonic options on public displays — separated from utilitarian options. For example, car dealerships could place sporty convertibles in the showroom (rather than practical sedans).

- If you’re an ECOMMERCE STORE, you could add more hedonic categories. If you sell food products, you could add a “Guilty Pleasures” category — which removes all utilitarian options.

**TACTIC: EXTRACT AN EFFORTFUL ACTION BEFORE HEDONIC CHOICES**

People want to indulge...but they need justification.

That’s why people are more willing to work for hedonic options. When people do work — even if it’s unrelated — they feel less guilt:

“...higher required effort shifts consumer preference from necessity to luxury rewards, because higher efforts reduce the guilt that is often associated with choosing luxuries over necessities.”  
(Kivetz & Simonson, 2002, pp. 155)

To spark hedonic choices, extract any effortful action before the choice.
If you’re a **RETAILER**, you could try stocking hedonic options toward the back of the store — so that people need to walk a longer distance.

Similarly...

**Tactic: Use Hedonic Rewards to Incentive Behavior**

Want customers to take a survey? A hedonic incentive will be more enticing than a utilitarian incentive (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002).

Since work is required, they’ll feel justified in indulging. Many will view it as an *opportunity*, rather than work.

You could also incorporate hedonic rewards into loyalty programs, where consumers “work” to achieve rewards. Kivetz and Simonson (2002) found that consumers are more likely to join a loyalty program if the rewards are hedonic.

Specifically, the researchers recommended positioning utilitarian rewards in bottom tiers (and hedonic rewards in upper tiers):

> “...a supermarket [loyalty program] might offer $50 in supermarket vouchers for consumers who spend a total of $2,000, whereas consumers who spend $20,000 would be given the option of earning a three-day trip to Las Vegas.” (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002, pp. 169)
TACTIC: USE VIRTUOUS INCENTIVES FOR HEDONIC OPTIONS

Suppose that you donate a portion of profits to charity.

**FIRST**, that’s awesome. Good for you.

**SECOND**, that initiative will be more effective for hedonic options. Your donations will reduce the guilt of hedonic consumption.

In one study, students were more likely to redeem a coupon — which contained a charity incentive — if the store was hedonic in nature (*Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998*).

If you’re planning a CSR initiative, consider using it for a hedonic option.

MATCH THE CONSUMER’S TYPE OF MOTIVATION

People buy products to *promote* or *prevent* something. Consider toothpaste:

- **PROMOTION**: Teeth Whitening
- **PREVENTION**: Cavity Protection

Depending on that motivation, consumers process information differently (*Pham & Chang, 2010*).
• With needs to **PROMOTE**, you’re concerned with identifying opportunities. You process information from **HIGH-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE** so that you don’t miss options.

• With needs to **PREVENT**, you’re concerned with making errors. You process information from a **DETAILED PERSPECTIVE** so that you consider the “fine print.”

Those two perspectives influence your perception of options:

![Diagram showing high-level and feature-level perspectives]

Your sales copy should match the consumer’s motivational state. *Emphasize the type of information that people are seeking.* That “regulatory fit” will be more persuasive — because it’ll feel right (*Pham & Chang, 2010*).

Here are some tactics to create regulatory fit.

**TACTIC: OFFER LARGE CHOICE SETS FOR PROMOTION NEEDS**

With needs to promote, consumers prefer large choice sets:

“...given that promotion-focused consumers are expected to consider more options in general, a larger option set should elicit a greater regulatory fit
compared to a smaller option set” (Pham & Chang, 2010, pg. 4)

How can you identify someone’s motivational state? Oftentimes, you can tell by the product:

“Some products, such as individual stocks and trading accounts, seem to be identified with promotion and the achievement of gains. Other products, such as mutual funds and retirement accounts, seem to be identified with prevention and the avoidance of losses.” (Zhou & Pham, 2004, pp. 133)

Thus, a larger choice set would be better for individual stocks (whereas a smaller choice set would be better for mutual funds).

**TACTIC: USE UNSTRUCTURED LISTS FOR PREVENTION NEEDS**

You could also adjust option categories — depending on the motivation:

- **PROMOTION**: Use tightly structured categories
- **PREVENTION**: Use unstructured categories

That finding stems from the mental processing for each need:

- **PROMOTION**: Consumers can evaluate categorical options more easily (because they’re focused on the big picture)
• **PREVENTION**: Consumers can evaluate single-level formats more easily (because they're focused on the finer details)

In one study, Pham and Chang (2010) presented one of two restaurant menus: a *hierarchical menu* or a *single-level menu*. In each case, participants evaluated their food more favorably when the menu “fit” their motivational state.
STEP 2: FORM THE CONSIDERATION SET

Once people recognize a problem, they identify solutions in two ways: internal searches and external searches (see Solomon, 2014).

Here are some strategies to help you during this stage.

DISPLAY THE OPTIONS PROPERLY

How should you present options? Should you present them altogether? Sequentially? And where should you position your target option?

TACTIC: PRESENT ALL OPTIONS TOGETHER

Earlier, I recommended sequential presentations for hedonic options. That way, people can't compare them with utilitarian options.

However, only use that tactic if your target option triggers a lot of guilt. Usually, simultaneous presentations will be more effective.

Sequential presentations reduce choice satisfaction because people “hope” for a better option:
“...choosers presented with their options simultaneously tend to remain focused on the current set of options, comparing them among each other; whereas choosers presented with their options sequentially tend to imagine a better option, hoping it will become available.” (Mogilner, Shiv, & Iyengar, 2013, pp. 1300)

**TACTIC: PRESENT ALL OPTIONS TOGETHER**

Suppose that you sell jewelry. Once you learn the customer’s preferences, don’t bring out a single option. Bring out *multiple* options.

More importantly, position those options as the “best fitting” options. Crush any hope for a better option.

You can always bring out more options afterward. But you need to prevent the “hope” for a better alternative. Otherwise customers will evaluate current options less favorably.

**TACTIC: POSITION TARGET OPTIONS FIRST OR LAST IN SEQUENTIAL PRESENTATIONS**

If you *need* to use a sequential presentation, exert control over your position in the sequence. Ideally, position your target option first or last.

Thanks to *primacy* and *recency* effects, we develop a stronger memory — and thus preference — for the first and last positions (Murdock, 1962).
You should also consider the impact on memory (see Miller & Campbell, 1959).

- The **FIRST ITEM** will have a greater impact on **LONG-TERM MEMORY**
- The **LAST ITEM** will have a greater impact on **WORKING MEMORY**

That finding plays a role in *choice distance*:

- Choose the **FIRST POSITION** when the choice is in the **FUTURE**
- Choose the **LAST POSITION** when the choice is **IMMEDIATE**

Have an interview coming up? Schedule your interview in accordance with the hiring timeline:

- **GENERAL HIRING NEED** → Early Mornings (i.e., first interview of the day)
- **IMMEDIATE HIRING NEED** → Late Afternoons (i.e., last interview of the day)

(you can refer to my [negotiation article](#) for more interview tips)

This tactic works for *sequential* presentations. For *simultaneous* presentations...
**Tactic: Position Target Options in the Center of Simultaneous Presentations**

With simultaneous presentations, position your target option in the center. With a line of items, we subconsciously gravitate toward central options.

That tendency influences our behavior everyday:

> “Whether people were choosing a product from a grocery shelf, deciding which bathroom stall to use, or marking a box on a questionnaire, they avoided the ends and tended to make their selection from the middle.” ([Christenfeld, 1995](#), pp. 50)

But why are we more likely to choose from the center?

With simultaneous presentations, your eyes are naturally drawn toward the center — because of the *central fixation bias* ([Tatler, 2007](#)). And that triggers a feedback loop known as the *central gaze cascade effect* ([Atalay, Bodur, & Rasolofoarison, 2012](#)).

After viewing the central options, you still need to view the peripheral options. So you move your eyes toward the left. Then you move your eyes toward the right — *while crossing over the central options again*. Afterward, you move your eyes back to the center for balance.
Now, let’s tally up the eye fixations:

- **Left-Most Options**: 1
- **Central Options**: 3
- **Right-Most Options**: 1

Due to those fixations, central options capture a larger percentage of our focus. And that triggers the feedback loop:

- The more you look at an option, the more you like it.
- The more you like an option, the more you look at it.

Because we devote more attention to the central options, we become more likely to choose them.

- If you’re a **MARKETER**, position high ROI pricing plans in the middle (with a contrasting color to capture more attention)
- If you’re a **RETAILER**, stock high ROI products on middle shelves. Christenfeld (1995) analyzed supermarket data with four rows of products. He found that 71% of people chose products from the middle two rows.

**Tactic: Use Memory-Based Choices for Hedonic Targets**

Which choice is better:

- **STIMULUS-BASED**: People choose from options that are physically present
• **MEMORY-BASED**: People choose from options in their memory

That answer involves cognitive load.

Memory-based choices exert more cognitive load. People need to identify the ideal option while maintaining the consideration set in memory. That’s strenuous:

> “…under a stimulus-based procedure, there is no need to recall the relevant options and no need to maintain them in working memory; thus, the task of identifying a favorite occurs in a context of relatively plentiful mental resources.” ([Rottenstreich, Sood, & Brenner, 2007](#), pp. 462)

When you experience cognitive load, you tend to use *heuristic processing*. You place greater weight on emotional and sensory-rich information. And that’s why hedonic options are better for memory-based choices.

In one study, people were more likely to choose a hedonic food (e.g., chocolate cake) when they chose from memorized set of options ([Rottenstreich, Sood, & Brenner, 2007](#)).

If your target option is hedonic, remove all the options from view before requesting the final choice.

**TACTIC:** **USE MEMORY-BASED CHOICES FOR HEDONIC TARGETS**
ADD OR EMPHASIZE VARIETY WITHIN YOUR SET

Perceived variety is powerful in choice. Researchers have connected it to various benefits:

- Higher brand share (Chong, Ho, & Tang, 1998)
- Higher purchase and consumption quantities (Khan & Wansink, 2004)
- Higher perceived quality (Berger, Draganska, & Simonson, 2007)
- Lower satiation and churn (Redden, 2008)

Here are some ways to maximize the perceived variety of your set.

TACTIC: CREATE SUBCATEGORICAL LABELS FOR PRODUCT FEATURES

When people eat food, they become full (i.e., “satiated”). Likewise, people satiate on experiences. And that’s bad. You need to reduce satiation.

So...why do people become satiated?

Inman (2001) found that people satiate on sensory features (e.g., taste), rather than non-sensory features (e.g., brand). If consumers encounter the same sensory experience, they’ll get “full.”

They’ll either:

- Switch to a competitor
- Stop purchasing altogether

Both are discouraging.

To prevent satiation, emphasize the variety within your set. In one study, people ate more candy when it was sorted by color (Kahn & Wansink, 2004). That assortment increased perceived variety — which enticed people to take more.
Redden (2008) found another way to increase perceived variety: *subcategory*.

“…people satiate less if they categorize the consumption episodes at lower levels. For instance, as people ate more jelly beans, their enjoyment declined less quickly when the candy was categorized specifically (e.g., cherry, orange) rather than generally (e.g., jelly bean).” (pp. 624)

By subcategorizing an activity, you highlight the differences within that activity. In turn, people feel less satiated because it seems less repetitive.

In a follow up study, people were more likely to keep studying if they focused on a subcategorical label:

Suppose that you have a SaaS business. Let’s call it “Acme.”

You could label your primary features with your company name:

- **AUTOMATION** → Acme Automation
- **CRM** → Acme CRM
• **ANALYTICS** → Acme Analytics

Whenever you reference those features, you could use those labels:

- **NO LABEL**: “With Acme, you can automate XYZ”
- **LABEL**: “With Acme Automation, you can automate XYZ.”

With those labels, you subcategorize your offering. Suddenly your features become separate entities.

In turn, those labels subconsciously increase the perceived variety of your offering. And that gives you two benefits:

- Your offering becomes more enticing for prospective customers
- You reduce satiation (and thus churn) for current customers

Plus, customers will reference your features using those subcategories (e.g., “Acme Automation”). And that’s great for SEO. You’ll increase *keyword co-occurrence*. Search engines will associate those keywords with your company.

This tactic might be clunky from a branding perspective. So it’s just an idea. But the main takeaway is that subcategorical framing will reduce satiation.
**TACTIC: ADD VISUALS IN EARLY STAGES OF CHOICE**

Townsend and Kahn (2014) found support for the visual preference heuristic. Consumers prefer selecting from visual choice sets — because the imagery increases perceived variety.

Why does that happen?

We process images in a gestalt manner. *We look at the whole*. And that’s faster (and less deliberate) than text-based processing.

Be careful, however. Visuals work best in early choice stages:

“...it would be beneficial to have the upfront information about the store and its products presented in a visual manner [on the homepage], emphasizing the ease of the decision process and amount of variety. Then, at the point of actual consideration for purchase, on the product offerings pages a more text-based interface should cause consumers to slow down, review each option more carefully, and be less likely to opt out of choice.” ([Townsend & Kahn, 2014](#) pg. 19)

**TACTIC: PRESENT SMALL CHOICE SETS IN A DISORGANIZED ASSORTMENT**

Have a small choice set? Then you need some extra oomph to maximize variety.
In that case, adjust the organization of your set:

In one study, children took more jelly beans from a small set when the assortment was unstructured (Kahn & Wansink, 2004). The disorganization increased perceived variety:

“...[in large sets] a disorganized assortment can make it more difficult for consumers to recognize and appreciate the full extent of the variety. By contrast, for small sets, the organization of the assortment may make it relatively obvious that there are not many alternatives available, whereas disorganization can obscure this fact and increase perception of variety.” (Kahn & Wansink, 2004, pp. 520)

REDUCE THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF LARGE CHOICE SETS

Most of you are probably familiar with the paradox of choice. If so, you’re probably tired of hearing about the jam study.

**Long story short:** more options can lead to choice overload. People feel overwhelmed, and they become less likely to choose.

But that finding has been somewhat controversial. Recently, a meta-analysis revealed that the effect might be smaller than we thought (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010). Across all studies, the mean effect size was zero.

However, Chernev, Bockenholt, and Goodman (2015) clarified things. They identified four factors when choice overload occurs:
• **FACTOR 1:** Complex choices
• **FACTOR 2:** Difficult choices
• **FACTOR 3:** Uncertain preferences
• **FACTOR 4:** High effort choices

In those situations, large choice sets are harmful. So you’ll need to reduce their negative effects.

**TACTIC: ADD MORE CATEGORIES IN LARGE CHOICE SETS**

Why are large choice sets overwhelming? Because consumers need to identify differences among many options.

However, categories can simplify that process:

“...because categories allow choosers to perceive the variety available in extensive choice sets, an increased number of categories may be able to alleviate the detrimental effects of choice overload.” ([Mogilner, Rudnick, & Iyengar, 2008](#), pp. 211)

Even if those categories are absurd or unrelated (e.g., “Category A”, “Category B”), consumers still search for meaning in those categories. So they’ll still find differences more easily.

![Diagram of Tactic: Add More Categories in Large Choice Sets](image)
In addition, categorization acts like a *chunking* mechanism. For example, we chunk phone numbers to make them easier to remember:

```
5551234567 → (555) 123-4567
9 entities → 3 entities
```

Likewise, categories can make a large choice set cognitively manageable.

**TACTIC: CATEGORIZE LARGE CHOICE SETS BY HIGH-LEVEL BENEFITS**

Be careful if your options are very different. Too much variety can backfire in large choice sets.

In large sets, you should usually increase the perceived *similarity* of options. That way, you reduce information overload.

How can you increase the similarity? Xu, Jiang, and Dhar (2013) triggered an abstract mindset:

```
“...consumers with an abstract representation perceive the options in the assortment as being more similar and accordingly experience less choice difficulty...” (pp. 548)
```

But how do you trigger an abstract mindset?

For one, you could emphasize the high-level benefits of your options (Xu, Jiang, & Dhar, 2013). Consumers will start evaluating your options from a broader standpoint.

And you could do the opposite with smaller choice sets. Emphasize concrete features so that you trigger a detail-oriented mindset. Those details will accentuate differences between options — thus increasing the perceived variety of your set.
Second, you could also adjust the categorization of your options:

“...grouping various products in the oral care aisle by subcategories (e.g., toothpaste, mouthwash, floss in distinct shelves) rather than by brands (e.g., Crest, Colgate) would likely result in a more abstract representation and consequently less choice difficulty and greater satisfaction.” (Xu, Jiang, & Dhar, 2013, pp. 558)

**TACTIC: PLACE UTILITARIAN TARGETS IN LARGE-choice sets**

Consumers are more likely to choose utilitarian and virtuous options in large choice sets (Sela, Berger, & Liu, 2009).

- **Eating at a restaurant?** With small menus, you’re more likely to choose the pizza. With large menus, you’re more likely to choose the Caesar salad.
- **Watching a movie?** With small choice sets, you’re more likely to choose an inappropriate comedy. With large choice sets, you’re more likely to choose an award-winning drama.

Sela, Berger, and Liu (2009) ran multiple studies, and they attributed that phenomenon to the guilty nature of hedonic options.

With large choice sets, people have trouble deciding. So they tend to choose options that are more justifiable (i.e., utilitarian and virtuous options).
If you’re selling a utilitarian or virtuous product, focus on venues and retailers with large selections:

“...manufacturers of healthy snacks would be better off pursuing venues with larger selections. Similarly, an award-winning (but nonentertaining) movie might be better off shown in a 21-screen multiplex theater rather than a small two-screen theater when rivaling shoot-'em-up action flicks.” (Sela, Berger, & Liu, 2009, pp. 950)
STEP 3: EVALUATE THE OPTIONS

Next, people evaluate the options. This step might seem straightforward — but it’s the most complex part of the choice process.

I’ve excluded parts of the cognitive process for brevity. But I’ll eventually update this article with a video covering those steps. If you’re subscribed to my blog, I’ll let you know when it’s live.

PROPERLY FRAME THE ATTRIBUTES AND DESCRIPTIONS

How should you communicate the features and benefits of your target options? Here are some tactics.

TACTIC: PARTITION FAVORABLE PRODUCTS AND ATTRIBUTES

When you present people with multiple options, they tend to distribute resources equally across those options:

“...[for] decision tasks in which people are called on to allocate a scarce resource [e.g., money, choices, belief] over a fixed set of possibilities [e.g., investment opportunities, consumption options, events]...they are biased toward even allocation.” (Fox, Bardolet, & Lieb, 2005, pp. 338)

How can you apply that finding?
You should separate favorable products and attributes into multiple categories. That way, favorable options receive more allocated resources.

For example, you could separate a healthy food category into smaller categories:

...or you could partition safer investment funds:

The same applies to product attributes:

“...attributes that are displayed as separate categories tend to receive greater decision weight than attributes grouped under umbrella categories.” (Martin & Norton, 2009, pp. 908)

Consider car attributes. Those attributes can be...

- **PRACTICAL** (e.g., safety, mileage, warranty)
- **STYLISH** (e.g., design, stereo, horsepower)

However, the practical attributes play a larger role in the decision. So you want to maximize their perceived importance.

Martin and Norton (2009) accomplished that goal by separating practical attributes into additional categories. Those separate categories helped funnel more attention to the important attributes.
With more attention on important attributes, people were more likely to choose a car.

**TACTIC: EMPHASIZE NONCOMPLEMENTARY FEATURES WITHIN A BRAND**

You’re buying toothpaste. And you’re choosing between two brands:

- **BRAND A** differentiates their toothpaste by **FUNCTION** (e.g., teeth whitening, cavity protection, breath freshening)
- **BRAND B** differentiates their toothpaste by **FLAVOR** (e.g., mint, lemon, cinnamon)

All else equal, you’re more likely to buy Brand B. And the answer involves *noncomplementary features* ([Cherney, 2005](#)).

- **COMPLEMENTARY FEATURES** are additive. If you blend teeth whitening with cavity protection, you create a superior offering.
- **NONCOMPLEMENTARY FEATURES** are *NOT* additive. If you blend mint with lemon, the inherent value doesn’t change.

[Cherney (2005)](#) tested *complementary vs. noncomplementary* choice sets. And people were less likely to choose from complementary choice sets. Why? Complementary features reinforced a sense of inferiority:

> “Consider an offering featuring a single attribute (e.g., cavity prevention toothpaste). Adding an option differentiated by a complementary feature (e.g., tartar control) highlights an attribute dimension on which the original product is inferior, thus decreasing its overall attractiveness.” ([Cherney, 2005](#), pp. 749)
The takeaway? Within a single brand, differentiate options by noncomplementary features. If you want to target people interested in other complementary features, add a separate brand to your product line.

**TACTIC: EMPHASIZE FEATURE-LEVEL ATTRIBUTES FOR COMPARABLE OPTIONS**

Earlier, I described abstract mindsets.

With large choice sets, you should emphasize high-level benefits so that consumers evaluate options from a broad standpoint. That way, you increase the perceived similarity among options (thus reducing choice overload).

A similar concept occurs with option comparability. For example:

- **COMPARABLE**: Netflix vs. Hulu
- **NON-COMPARABLE**: Netflix vs. Spotify Premium

With abstract mindsets, comparable options seem too similar. Consumers need to switch from an abstract mindset to a concrete, feature-level mindset. And that depletes mental resources — lowering choice likelihood (Cho, Khan, & Dhar, 2013).

But here’s how to resolve that issue:

- With **COMPARABLE OPTIONS**, you should emphasize LOW-LEVEL ATTRIBUTES. If a consumer is choosing between Netflix and Hulu, they’ll focus on price, number of screens/devices, HD availability, etc.
- With **NON-COMPARABLE OPTIONS**, you should emphasize HIGH-LEVEL BENEFITS. If a consumer is choosing between Netflix and Spotify, they’ll focus on overall enjoyment between TV/movies and music.

Always consider the competing options in the choice environment. Then adjust your copy and framing accordingly.
A similar process occurs with choice distance.

When people are planning a future event, they develop an abstract mindset (Cho, Khan, & Dhar, 2013). So high-level benefits are more effective (and vice versa for immediate choices).

- For **IMMEDIATE CHOICES**, emphasize **LOW-LEVEL ATTRIBUTES**
- For **DISTANT CHOICES**, emphasize **HIGH-LEVEL BENEFITS**

Suppose that someone is planning a vacation:

“Depending on whether the client plans to travel in the distant or near future, a travel agent could highlight either the differences in overall “hedonic value” (e.g., rating out of 100) or the unique feature-level attributes of each destination (e.g., nightlife in Jamaica; scuba-diving in Aruba) in order to encourage choice...” (Cho, Khan, & Dhar, 2013, pg. 32)
TACTIC: EMPHASIZE HIGH PERFORMANCE ON A SUBSET OF ATTRIBUTES

Consider three brands of toothpaste. Each brand has a different positioning:

- **BRAND A**: Emphasizes teeth whitening
- **BRAND B**: Emphasizes cavity protection
- **BRAND C**: Emphasizes both teeth whitening and cavity protection

Thanks to the *zero-sum heuristic*, consumers will perceive **BRAND C** to be the least effective on those two attributes (*Chernev, 2007*).

Why? *Chernev (2007)* found that consumers evaluate attributes in a compensatory fashion. Brands can’t be strong across *all* attributes:

> “...a product specializing on a single attribute is perceived to be superior on that attribute relative to an all-in-one option, even when this attribute is exactly the same for both options.” (*Chernev, 2007*, pp. 430)

When positioning your product, avoid an *all-in-one* strategy. Instead, determine the benefits that are most important to your target market. Then emphasize your performance on those benefits.

Still want more market share? Just pinpoint another segment of people who value other criteria. Then create a separate brand emphasizing those attributes.
TACTIC: RAISE UNDESIRABLE ATTRIBUTES ABOVE ZERO

Some attributes can be undesirable (e.g., calories in food). If your option successfully removes that attribute, you might feel inclined to promote it (e.g., “0 calories”).

But that’s sometimes the wrong approach. And here’s why...

Consumers evaluate options using relative comparisons. They compare options to each other. Consider two brands of yogurt:

- **BRAND A**: 5 grams of fat
- **BRAND B**: 1 gram of fat

In that example, consumers know that Brand A has 5x more fat than Brand B. The comparison is *meaningful*.

Now, let’s replace Brand B with Brand C:

- **BRAND A**: 5 grams of fat
- **BRAND C**: 0 gram of fat

In that example, consumers can’t use a relative comparison. *The difference is infinite.* Instead, consumers need to evaluate 5 grams of fat in absolute terms — which is less meaningful:

“...compared to zero, any number is infinitely larger, so this type of comparison becomes meaningless. In this case, consumers lose the reference point that allows them to use relative comparisons...” ([Palmeira, 2011](#), pp. 16)

Albeit counterintuitive, you can increase the perceived value of an option by raising undesirable attributes above zero.

Palmeira (2011) conducted multiple studies and found support for that *zero-comparison effect*. People were more likely to choose a hi-fi system...
with a small audio distortion (compared to a system with no distortion).

The application works both ways:

- With **UNDESIRABLE ATTRIBUTES**, be careful with zero magnitudes. One gram of fat is often better than zero grams of fat.
- With **DESIRABLE ATTRIBUTES**, avoid very small magnitudes. Even if your option has a slightly higher magnitude than zero, you might want to round down to zero so that you prevent relative comparisons.

**TACTIC: ADD MORE ATTRIBUTES TO HEDONIC OPTIONS**

When describing your options, consider the sheer number of attributes:

> "...some rental car websites (e.g., Avis.com) highlight only a few key features of each vehicle (e.g., category, passenger capacity), whereas others (e.g., Hertz.com) list dozens of attributes under each option (e.g., cargo room, gas mileage, safety and entertainment features)." ([Sela & Berger, 2012](#), pp. 942)

So which route is best? You should add more attributes when your option is hedonic. It’s due to the guilty nature of hedonic consumption.
Even if your attributes are slightly repetitive or meaningless — *it doesn’t matter*. The sheer *number* will make your hedonic option seem more justifiable (Sela & Berger, 2012).

**TACTIC: ADD MORE ATTRIBUTES TO HEDONIC OPTIONS**

**TACTIC: ARRANGE ATTRIBUTES FROM STRONGEST TO WEAKEST**

When evaluating options, we succumb to *leader-driven primacy effects*.

Upon viewing options, we *immediately* pinpoint the prime candidate. And then we become biased. We start looking for information to support our hypothesis.

> “Leader-driven primacy uses initial product information to install a targeted brand as the early leader in a choice between two brands. Biased evaluation of subsequent attributes builds support for the targeted brand, causing the choice itself to be biased.” ([Carlson, Meloy, & Russo, 2006](#) pp. 513)

That’s why you need to arrange attributes from strongest to weakest. Your option needs to become the early leader.

**TACTIC: ARRANGE ATTRIBUTES FROM STRONGEST TO WEAKEST**
If you display a comparison table with your competition, put your strongest attributes at the top.

GUIDE THE FOCUS TOWARD YOUR TARGET OPTION

Favorable options attract attention. In turn, people become more likely to choose them.

However, that process also works in reverse. The more you look at an option, the more you tend to choose it (Armel, Beaumel, & Rangle, 2008). Thus, your option needs to merely capture attention.

Here are some ideas...

TACTIC: ADD VISUAL OR SENSORY CUES TO TARGET OPTIONS

Earlier, I mentioned the central gaze cascade effect.

One mechanism behind that effect is processing fluency. The more you look at a stimulus, the faster your brain can process it. Because that fluency feels good, you misattribute that pleasantness to the stimulus.

That’s why you should make target options distinct from other options. That contrast will capture more attention — influencing preference and choice.
The distinction could be visual (e.g., color, size, shape). But any sensory cue will work.

For example, Shen and Sengupta (2014) placed a loudspeaker above two adjacent vending machines. The researchers influenced the choice of machine by playing a news broadcast. The audio guided people's attention toward the machine that was closest to the noise.

That finding plays a role in other contexts too — such as retail:

“...in the store, a salesperson might chat with a consumer who is deliberating over two options. Even if the chat has nothing to do with the products in question, the consumer is likely to end up paying more visual attention to the option that is located near the salesperson and, therefore, will be more likely to choose it.” (Shen & Sengupta, 2014, pg. 19)

**TACTIC: RECOMMENDED AN OPTION**

People want their choice to be easy. So make it easy. Recommend an option.

For the research, you can refer to my article on conversion optimization. The major factors include conformity (Tactic 17) and default options (Tactic 18).

You can use recommendations in different ways:

- **WEB DESIGNER:** Emphasize the “most popular” pricing plan
- **RESTAURANT:** Highlight menu options with a high ROI
• RETAILER: Create product displays with recommended options

TACTIC: STOCK LESSER-KNOWN BRANDS IN NARROW AISLES

Want to nudge people toward a unique, distinctive, or uncommon option? Then crowd the customer’s space.

“...a relatively small, physically restrictive space activates feelings of confinement and consequently a perceived threat to one’s freedom. As a result, threatened individuals are likely to exhibit reactance in the form of acts aimed at regaining their freedom.” (Levav & Zhu, 2009, pg. 1)

They regain that freedom by choosing a distinctive option.

In one study, Levav and Zhu (2009) found that people choose unique products when retail aisles are narrow. The same occurred in another study when people were breaching someone’s personal space (Xu, Shen, & Wyer, 2012).

That finding has implications for marketers and retailers:

• In SMALL AND CROWDED SETTINGS, consumers will be more adventurous. Retailers should maximize the variety of their products. And marketers should stock lesser-known brands.

• In LARGE AND SPACIOUS SETTINGS, consumers will be less adventurous. Retailers should focus on the top brands. And marketers should stock their best-performing products.
TACTIC: USE FORFEITURE TASKS FOR HEDONIC TARGETS

Which choice task is better:

- **ACQUISITION**: Ask people which option(s) they want
- **FORFEITURE**: Ask people which option(s) they *don’t* want

*Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000)* found that forfeiture tasks influence people to choose hedonic options:

“...the relative salience of hedonic dimensions is greater when consumers decide which of several items to give up (forfeiture choices) than when they decide which item to acquire (acquisition choices).” (pp. 60)

With forfeiture tasks, consumers experience greater mental elaboration — which funnels their attention toward the sensory and imagery-evoking benefits of options (i.e., the hedonic qualities).

The takeaway? When your option is hedonic, transform the choice into a forfeiture task. Ask consumers which items they *don’t* want.

![Acquisition vs. Forfeiture Tasks](image)

**Acquisition Tasks**
Use for *Utilitarian* Targets

**Forfeiture Tasks**
Use for *Hedonic* Targets

But the implications stem beyond choice task. When you switch products or brands, for example, sometimes you forfeit benefits in the current option:

“Consider, for example, someone who is debating between two apartments. One has a nicer view (a
relatively hedonic feature), but the other provides a shorter commute to work (a relatively utilitarian feature). If the person’s current apartment has a nice view and a short commute, the choice will be viewed as a forfeiture decision..." (Dhar & Werternbroch, 2000, pp. 61)

Here are some other ways to apply that finding:

Avoid Cutting Hedonic Features from Products
Do you need to remove features from a product? Avoid removing hedonic features:

“...consumers may be more reluctant to accept cuts on the more hedonic dimensions. In contrast, adding the same hedonic benefits may have relatively less impact on market share than would adding more utilitarian benefits.” (Dhar & Werternbroch, 2000, pp. 69)

Offer Buyout Options for Hedonic Items
Are people renting or leasing an option from you? If that item is hedonic, you could offer a buyout option at the end:

“...marketers may be able to add a hedonic premium to the buyout option price at which lessees of luxury or sports cars can buy their vehicles at the end of the lease term...we suspect that buyout rates are higher for these hedonic cars than for more utilitarian ones, such as compact cars or minivans.” (Dhar & Werternbroch, 2000, pp. 69-70)

**TACTIC: ADD DECOY OPTIONS TO GUIDE THE CHOICE**

To simplify a choice, you could add a **decoy option**.

With decoy options, you don’t expect consumers to choose them. Instead, they increase or decrease the choice share of other options.
When people see a clearly superior option, their choice becomes easier:

“...choice deferral may be greater when no single alternative is easily seen as the best, even though each option by itself is quite attractive.” ([Dhar & Nowlis, 1999](#), pp. 382)

You might have heard about the study with *Economist* magazine (see [Ariely, 2009](#)).

Imagine three subscriptions:

- **OPTION A**: Online subscription for $59
- **OPTION B**: Print subscription for $125
- **OPTION C**: Online *and* print subscription for $125

At first glance, **OPTION B** seems like a mistake. Any rational human would choose the online and print subscription for the same price. And that's what happened. Nobody chose it.

However, **OPTION B** shifted choice share away from **OPTION A**. More people chose **OPTION C** — the more expensive subscription — generating more overall revenue.

Decoy options are part of a larger category known as *context effects*. [Roederkerk, Van Heerde, and Bijmolt (2011)](#) explain three types of context effects:

1. Attraction Effect
2. Compromise Effect
3. Similarity Effect
1. Attraction Effect
Consistent with the subscription example, people are more likely to choose a similar — yet superior — option in a choice set.

2. Compromise Effect
People are more likely to choose a compromise option: an option in the middle of two extremes.

3. Similarity Effect
Newly added options will steal a greater amount of choice share from similar options (compared to dissimilar options).
This step is intertwined with the evaluation process. But you can use a few strategies to further nudge people toward your target option.

USE PRIMING TO INFLUENCE THEIR CHOICE

Certain words and images can influence people to adopt a choice strategy. This section will help you prime the best type of strategy.

TACTIC: USE DESIGNS THAT MATCH THE DESIRED CHOICE STRATEGY

Our environment subconsciously influences our perception and behavior. Even simple geometric patterns can dictate our choice strategy.

For example, Maimaran and Wheeler (2008) asked people to choose three chocolates. People were more likely to choose different chocolates if they were exposed to a varied geometric pattern (i.e., △00□0△), compared to a repetitive pattern (i.e., 000000).

In a follow up study, people were more likely to choose distinctive products if they were exposed to a distinctive pattern (i.e., 0000□00 vs. 0000000).

Use that finding when planning your designs:

- If your goal is VARIETY-SEEKING, use designs with heterogeneity. Incorporate a wide array of colors, shapes, and sizes in the choice environment (e.g., packaging, shopping carts, etc.).
• If your goal is a **UNIQUE CHOICE**, use designs with distinctive elements that pop out.

In both cases, people will be more likely to adopt a congruent choice strategy.

Always consider the visual context of your choice. Incorporate design elements that are congruent with the ideal option or choice strategy.

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**TACTIC: USE VARIETY-SEEKING LANGUAGE FOR NEW CUSTOMERS**

Pay attention to the wording near your options. Certain words can prime certain mindsets.

For example, *Fishbach, Ratner, and Zang (2011)* gave people a survey attached to a children's book. The researchers analyzed the effects of different book titles:

- **CONDITION 1**: “The Loyal Cat”
- **CONDITION 2**: “Bored! Bored! Bored!”
- **CONDITION 3**: control — no title

Those titles influenced people’s evaluation of products in the survey.

- The “loyal” title *decreased* choice variety
- The “bored” title *increased* variety

Always consider the words in your copy:
• If you’re marketing to **CURRENT CUSTOMERS**, use loyalty-related words. Those concepts will activate a need for consistency.

• If you’re marketing to **NEW CUSTOMERS**, use boredom or satiation-related words. Those concepts will activate a need for variety.

Sure, it’s nitpicky. And it probably won’t produce drastic changes. But it’s a good reminder about the subconscious impact of wording.

**TACTIC: ASK PEOPLE WHICH OPTIONS THEY PREFER**

Oftentimes, choices occur in two steps:

• **STEP 1**: People decide *whether* they want an option

• **STEP 2**: People decide *which* option they want

You can influence people to choose your option by skipping the first step. How? Prime a *which-to-choose* mindset.

It’s surprisingly easy.

*Xu and Wyer (2008)* simply asked people which animal they prefer: an *elephant* or *hippo*. And…that’s it. That question primed a which-to-choose mindset. In turn, those people were more likely to buy an unrelated product.

But don’t worry. You don’t need to ask people to choose an animal. Simply ask them which option(s) they prefer:

“…simply asking consumers which of two products they would prefer can have a similar impact. Stating a
preference appears to induce a which-to-buy mindset, leading people to think about which of several products they would like to buy under the implicit assumption that they have already decided to buy one of them.” (Xu & Wyer, 2007, pp. 564)

Also, you should usually offer more than one option. People tend to experience *single-option aversion* (Mochon, 2013). When given a single option, we’re more likely to defer that choice.

- A single option reinforces a *whether-to-choose* mindset.
- Multiple options reinforce a *which-to-choose* mindset

For more examples, refer to Tactic 20 in my [article on conversion optimization](#).
STEP 5: EVALUATE THE CHOSEN OPTION

Immediately after choosing, people are uncertain.

- Are they happy with the choice?
- Should they return the product?
- Will they purchase again?

In a marketing context, that *post-evaluation* is crucial. If they’re unhappy with the choice...

- They could spread negative word-of-mouth
- They could return the product
- They could never purchase again

When people start to doubt their choice, they resolve that *dissonance* in two ways:

- They **INCREASE** the value of CHOSEN OPTIONS
- They **DECREASE** the value of UNCHOSEN OPTIONS

This section will help you with both sides.

**REINFORCE THE VALUE OF CHOSEN OPTIONS**

Once people make a choice, they’ll seek validation. They’ll look for reasons to support it.

That’s why you should have mechanisms that reinforce the value of chosen options. For example...
Nowadays, you can grab fake reviews of anything. So people have become more skeptical of testimonials.

Need convincing?

I just created a fake company by reversing my last name. Here's a real video testimonial that I acquired for ADNELOK. Pay close attention to the wording.

(Call me crazy...but that $5 was totally worth it. Thanks, Fiverr.)

Testimonials can be effective. However, most people use them before a choice. Surprisingly, they might be more effective after a choice:

- **BEFORE A CHOICE**, consumers are skeptical. You want their money... and they know it. So many of them will doubt the sincerity of testimonials.
- **AFTER A CHOICE**, everything changes. Now, consumers are actively seeking validation to reduce their dissonance. So give them a testimonial. They’ll be more likely to trust it because of confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998).

Ideally, those testimonials should also appear before consumption. Why? Because those testimonials will increase the consumer's expectations.
When customers consume your product or service, they’ll have a more favorable experience because of their heightened expectations (see Lee, Frederick, & Ariely, 2006).

In the long run, you’ll have happier customers who either (a) purchase again or (b) remain subscribed.

**REDUCE THE SALIENCY OF UNCHOSEN OPTIONS**

Oftentimes, consumers resolve dissonance by seeking negative information about unchosen options.

You should probably avoid badmouthing your products. However, you should reduce the saliency and presence of those unchosen options. Otherwise you’ll be taunting the customer — worsening their dissonance.

**TACTIC: REMOVE OR CLOSE ALL UNCHOSEN OPTIONS**

Once people choose an option, don’t let them second-guess. Remove the leftover options so that you guide all attention on their choice.

Gu, Botti, and Faro (2013) found a powerful technique: *physical closure*.

“...physical acts that are metaphorically associated with the concept of closure (such as covering or turning a page on the rejected alternatives) trigger
choice closure in the context of difficult choices." (pg. 2)

In one of their studies, people gave higher evaluations of chocolate if they covered the container lid. In another study, people gave higher evaluations of a tea if they closed the menu after choosing.

The researchers offered some other implications:

- In a RETAIL CONTEXT, salespeople could position customers away from options (i.e., turning their back) once they make a choice. Or salespeople could move the option to another location.
- In an ONLINE CONTEXT, you could ask customers to click and cancel the options that they didn’t choose.
This article focused on tactics. But the psychology of choice is more complex.

Moving forward, I’ll add new insights periodically to fill in those missing gaps. *This article will be an ongoing endeavor.* If you’re subscribed to my blog, then I’ll let you know when I make the updates.

As always, thanks for putting up with another obnoxiously long article.