

# Product choice: When are consumers most satisfied?

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Consumers may be less satisfied with the choices they make if their options are presented one at a time rather than all at once, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Sequentially presented choices create [uncertainty](#). Consumers know that alternatives will become available in the future, but not what those alternatives will be. So there is always the possibility that a better option could later be available," write authors Cassie Mogilner (Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania), Baba Shiv (Stanford University), and Sheena Iyengar (Columbia University).

Many decisions—selecting a bar of soap at the [drugstore](#), an entrée at a restaurant, or a pair of shoes from [Zappos](#)—involve choosing from options presented all at once. However, many [important decisions](#)—choosing a job, a home, or even who to marry—involve options presented one at a time. Does the way options are presented affect [consumer satisfaction](#)?

In a series of experiments, consumers presented with options one at a time ended up less satisfied with, and ultimately less committed to, their choices than those presented with their options all at once. Consumers presented with their options all at once tended to remain focused on the current set of options and focused on comparing them against each other, whereas those presented with their options one at a time tended to imagine a better option, hoping it would eventually become available. This feeling of hope undermined how they later experienced their

choice, resulting in lower satisfaction and commitment levels.

"The primary difference between sequentially and simultaneously presented options is the presence of alternatives. Consumer satisfaction with a chosen option depends less on its objective merits, and more on how it compares to alternatives—real or imagined. Enjoying the most satisfaction from our choices might require being willing to give up the eternal quest for the best," the authors conclude.

**More information:** Cassie Mogilner, Baba Shiv, and Sheena Iyengar. "Eternal Quest for the Best: Sequential (vs. Simultaneous) Option Presentation Undermines Choice Commitment." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2013.

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