

How You Make Decisions Says a Lot About How Happy You Are; 'Maximizers' Check All Options, 'Satisficers' Make the Best Decision Quickly: Guess Who's Happier

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ABSTRACT

[...]Rachel's husband, J.J., interrupted: "Let's just call him Jimmy." In a study published in 2006 in the journal Psychological Science, Dr. Schwartz and colleagues followed 548 job-seeking college seniors at 11 schools from October through their graduation in June.

FULL TEXT

I was witness to a tricky marital exchange last week, when my sister and her husband were trying to name their new red Labrador puppy.

Rachel had spent hours trolling for ideas on the Internet and polling friends and family. Days later, she had dozens of monikers in the running--Valentino, Fonzie, Holden, Simba, Brandy Junior (named for our beloved childhood spaniel) and Olivia Newton John (don't ask).

Finally, Rachel's husband, J.J., interrupted: "Let's just call him Jimmy."

Psychology researchers have studied how people make decisions and concluded there are two basic styles. "Maximizers" like to take their time and weigh a wide range of options--sometimes every possible one--before choosing. "Satisficers" would rather be fast than thorough; they prefer to quickly choose the option that fills the minimum criteria (the word "satisfice" blends "satisfy" and "suffice").

"Maximizers are people who want the very best. Satisficers are people who want good enough," says Barry Schwartz, a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and author of "The Paradox of Choice."

Dr. Schwartz has developed a 13-level test to assess a person's decision-making orientation. Each statement is scored on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The higher your score, the more of a maximizer you are.

Most people fall somewhere in the middle. A person can maximize when it comes to some decisions and satisfice on others.

In a study published in 2006 in the journal *Psychological Science*, Dr. Schwartz and colleagues followed 548 job-seeking college seniors at 11 schools from October through their graduation in June.

Across the board, they found that the maximizers landed better jobs. Their starting salaries were, on average, 20% higher than those of the satisficers, but they felt worse about their jobs.

"The maximizer is kicking himself because he can't examine every option and at some point had to just pick something," Dr. Schwartz says. "Maximizers make good decisions and end up feeling bad about them. Satisficers make good decisions and end up feeling good."

Dr. Schwartz says he found nothing to suggest that either maximizers or satisficers make bad decisions more often.

Satisficers also have high standards, but they are happier than maximizers, he says. Maximizers tend to be more depressed and to report a lower satisfaction with life, his research found.

The older you are, the less likely you are to be a maximizer—which helps explain why studies show people get happier as they get older.

"One of the things that life teaches you is that 'good enough' is almost always good enough," Dr. Schwartz says. "You learn that you can get satisfaction out of perfectly wonderful but not perfect outcomes."

Dr. Schwartz says he found men are no more or less likely than women to be either satisficers or maximizers. He hasn't researched whether people tend to pair up with mates who have similar, or opposite, decision-making styles—or how they make decisions with a partner.

People with opposite styles might be better off together because they balance each other out, he theorizes. Standards will be high, but decisions will get made. "If you are both maximizers, neither of you will be able to relinquish your standards," Dr. Schwartz says.

David Gerzof Richard makes quick, decisive choices. His wife, Brooke, likes to research every option. The spouses, who live in Brookline, Mass., say they didn't learn to make decisions together until after an event early in their marriage that they refer to as "the car."

Mr. Richard, 39, a marketing professor and public relations executive, decided the couple needed a new car to replace their old one. He spent a few days researching SUVs, found a good deal on an Audi Q5 and signed the lease—without telling his wife.

"I knew that bringing her into the conversation about it up front was going to take way too long, and we would miss the deal," he says. "So I pushed the button."

Ms. Richard wasn't happy when he told her. At her insistence, the spouses spent the weekend test-driving five more cars.

"I was irritated because even though it was a very nice car, it was still a big decision, and a shared car that we were going to use together in the future when we have kids," says Ms. Richard, a 36-year-old furniture designer.

The couple stuck with the Q5—Ms. Richard agreed that it remained the best deal—but they both learned something about how their decision-making styles could complement each other's. "I will say, 'Let's get moving on this,'" Mr. Richard says, "and she will say, 'Slow your roll.'"

"His decision-making makes it so we can get it done faster and don't lose opportunities," Ms. Richard says. "And my decision-making makes sure we are truly not forgetting to consider what is important."

In most cases, whoever cares most about the result should choose, Dr. Schwartz says. This isn't the same as always letting the maximizer decide.

If the maximizer is paralyzed with indecision, it can work best if the satisficer chooses, Dr. Schwartz says. Many mismatched couples find it helps to let the person with the higher standards decide—lest the satisficer pick something that isn't up to the maximizer's standards.

Either way, couples should talk about the decision and narrow down the possibilities together. "Once you have narrowed the list from your point of view, what does it matter if your ridiculously perfectionist spouse chooses?" Dr. Schwartz says.

Rob Ynes creates spreadsheets when he makes major decisions. His wife, Mary Ellen, prides herself on being able to decide on a new car, children's names—"Even shoes!" she says—with little or no deliberation.

"I see it, I consider a few options and bam!—within minutes, a decision and most likely a purchase is made," says Ms. Ynes, a 50-year-old public relations representative in Redwood City, Calif.

During a recent kitchen renovation, they worked through design decisions together, but then disaster struck. Just before the backsplash was going to be installed, they learned the Italian stone they had selected was out of stock. "Panic set in," Ms. Ynes says. "Rob began to furiously call around to the different tile stores and search online for an exact replica of the stone that we could no longer have."

Mr. Ynes, 54, a certified public accountant and chief financial officer at a consumer-goods company, says, "I have learned in my profession that I need to make decisions that will stand up to scrutiny and the test of time. It is hard to separate that from my personal life."

After 48 hours, Ms. Ynes looked at several samples and quickly picked one. "Decision made. Move on," she says. "I think that in situations like this, compromise truly is the best and cheapest lawyer," she says.

A day later, though, her husband found the tile the couple had chosen originally—and that is what is being installed. "I am willing to put in a little extra time and make sure it's something I really want to live with," Mr. Ynes says.

As for the puppy, my 6-year-old nephew came up with a possible tie breaker: "Let's call him Lightning McQueen!"

Credit: By Elizabeth Bernstein

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