

Cognition: “Sleep on it” – the art of making big decisions.

For most of us the purchase of a new house or car will be one of the largest financial commitments we will make and we will, therefore, often agonise long and hard before making that final decision. However, new research has shown that for larger and more complex decisions we are probably better off letting our unconscious minds take over the decision making process.

A team of psychologists from the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands sought to test what is known as the “deliberation-without-attention” hypothesis. They found that in studies carried out both in the laboratory and amongst actual shoppers, “purchases of complex products were viewed more favorably when decisions had been made in the absence of attentive deliberation”. (Dijksterhuis *et al.* (2006)). The hypothesis is based on the idea that simple choices (such as choosing between different brands of shampoo) produce better results after conscious thought, whereas decisions in complex matters (such as buying a house or choosing a new car) should be left to unconscious thought.

The researchers divided the study participants into two groups and devised a series of experiments to test out the “deliberation without attention” hypothesis. One group was given four minutes to chose a favourite car from a list having weighed up four attributes including fuel consumption and legroom. The other group was given a series of puzzles to keep their conscious selves busy before making a decision. In this situation the conscious thought group managed to pick the best car based on the four attributes around 55% of the time, while the unconscious thought group only chose the right one 40% of the time.

However, when the conscious thought group were asked to chose a favourite car after considering twelve different attributes, the conscious thought group's success rate fell

to around 23% as opposed to nearly 60% for the unconscious thought group.

In another study, the researchers questioned a group of shoppers to establish how satisfied they were with their purchases of simple products such as kitchen accessories and clothing. They were also asked about more complex products such as furniture. The researchers found the shoppers they had classed as conscious shoppers reported most post-choice satisfaction with the simple products they bought, but that the results were reversed with the more complex products.

In assessing the results of their studies, the research team concluded that the problem with conscious thought is that the brain can only focus on a few things at the same time, which can lead to some aspects being given undue importance.

As lead researcher Dr Ap Dijksterhuis said: “The take-home message is that when you have to make a decision, the first step should be to get all the information necessary for the decision. Once you have the information, you have to decide, and this is best done with conscious thought for simple decisions, but left to unconscious thought - to ‘sleep on it’ - when the decision is complex”.

References:-

Ap Dijksterhuis, Maarten W. Bos, Loran F. Nordgren, Rick B. van Baaren On Making the Right Choice: The Deliberation-Without-Attention Effect *Science* 17th February 2006, Vol. 311, no.5763, pp. 1005-1007

“Sleep on it – decision makers told.” BBC Health 17.2.06