

This Holiday Season, No More FOMO

Elizabeth Pimentel – December 17, 2018

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I have a serious case of FOMO.

When faced with several choices and a very limited time, I become psychologically paralyzed because choosing one means never knowing what would have happened if I'd chosen another. And the Christmas shopping season makes those selections even more difficult.

“No FOMO here — just Deals of the Day!” proclaimed the subject heading of a national retailer's email. By advertising “over 25,000 deals of the day” and exhorting customers to “Hurry — Ends Tonight! One Day Sale,” it hoped to motivate those who don't want to miss out to buy now.

Although not (yet) defined as a psychiatric condition by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the fear of missing out is common. Also known as FOMO, or FOMS (fear of missing something), it's the distress over not being included in something that others are experiencing or anxiety that one might pass up an opportunity.

During holiday shopping season, retailers have latched on to the FOMO segment of the population with marketing campaigns to generate excitement and foster brand loyalty, as in the email I received. Yet FOMO sufferers would be discouraged from attempting to choose, given the short time spans allowed for purchasing decisions and the vast selections.

I should know. When forced into situations in which the options are seemingly limitless, I become overwhelmed and incapable of making up my mind.

While at a recent family reunion in Honolulu, I was determined to purchase a ukulele. After all, what better place for a New Yorker to buy one? I searched online for local retailers. But visiting stores required leaving my relatives, and I didn't want to forgo the opportunity to be with them. Another problem was the enormous number of ukuleles available in all sizes, types of wood, levels of decoration and price ranges. Poring over all the alternatives would have taken me weeks, given my need to examine them all.

My cousin Chris, a sales manager who'd watched a documentary called “The Costco Craze,” suggested I go there. “Costco has studied the consumer's mentality in order to learn the best way to sell,” he explained. “They found that if shoppers go into a store and are inundated with alternatives, they're less likely to make a purchase.”

In his 2004 book, “The Paradox of Choice,” psychology professor Barry Schwartz argues that consumers are happier and less anxious when given fewer options. By limiting the possibilities, Costco simplifies the buyers’ decision-making. This is the perfect answer to a FOMO victim’s dilemma.

Still, I was hesitant to head to Costco and miss out on family activities. As I pondered how to proceed, Chris phoned the store to inquire about ukuleles. In his three attempts, no one answered. Exactly nine minutes after his calls, my cousin Roz received an auspicious text message from her neighbor.

“I don’t believe this!” Roz exclaimed. “She’s never done this before.” She passed me her phone, and I read the message aloud: “Hi, I’m at Costco. Is there anything you want?”

“This is a sign,” Chris declared. “You better go for it.”

Roz texted back, “A gallon of milk and a ukulele, please.”

Within minutes, we received a photo and description of the ukulele. It was made from the wood of the Hawaiian koa tree, with pretty abalone decorations around the edge. It was practical, and it came with a carrying case. And, at under \$100, the price was right.

By helping me make the selection, Costco saved me from missing anything with my family — with a little help from a considerate neighbor and perhaps the hand of Providence, of course.

Also, I learned that if I can limit the choices in my life, I just might be able to concentrate on the meaningful decisions — and accomplish something this holiday season.

