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Colour System Design Part I: Dealing with Choice

"Yes," I answered you last night;
"No," this morning, sir, I say:
Colors seen by candlelight
will not look the same by day.

From 'The Lady's Yes' written in 1844 – Elizabeth Barrett Browning

The challenge

It is commonly recognized that colour is a key driver behind paint sales for a large section of the population. Yet as an industry, we still have not found a way to merchandise colour that simplifies the selection process.

Large strides have been made over the past few years in improving in-store Colour Systems with trend selections, larger colour displays, better visuals, colour combinations and colour mapping, although the core problem, which is the fear of choice, has yet to be effectively addressed.

Paint industry research into consumer behaviour consistently points to the fear of choice as the number one reason why consumers either do not choose colour or stick to a safe palette.

The study of choice cannot be covered in its entirety in this article, but I will reference here a few key principles, which I believe are relevant for this discussion.

Choice and how to optimize the selection process is therefore the riddle that needs to be solved.

Asian Disease Problem

A classic choice problem is well illustrated in Tversky & Kahneman's 1981 study that focused on treatment alternatives for a hypothetical "Asian Disease Problem":
Imagine that the United States is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed.
Program A: 200 people will be saved.
Program B: There is a 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved and a 2/3 probability that no people will be saved.

This experiment was run with different sets of participants and the results were interesting although not necessarily surprising.

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The majority of participants preferred Program A - where 200 people would be saved with certainty as opposed to Program B - where 600 people would have a 1/3 chance of surviving the deadly disease. (Both programs have the same outcome of saving 200 people).

This was an interesting result and was described by the authors as a certainty effect where humans preferred a "sure thing" as opposed to an outcome with a probability attached to it – regardless of whether the two outcomes yielded the same results.

These authors and several others have documented this anomalous behaviour under various settings.

1. Faced with too many options, people often avoid making any decision at all.

2. Faced with too many options, people often use the quickest/easiest choices, rather than the best basis for choosing.

So, what do these lessons mean for colour selection in Decorative Coatings, where the choice is also quite personal and the options available are overwhelming?

It means that we have to find a way to make the process easier, better and more effective otherwise we lose the opportunity to create a colour evangelist. Creating a large population group who finds colour selection fun, satisfying and effective, will drive brand loyalty and create a generation of "want to " consumers.

"The Paradox of Choice"

Initial thoughts may be to limit the size of the colour palette and reduce the choices facing the consumer, thereby providing only "sure thing" or popular colour choices, but this can also be counterproductive.

Barry Schwartz's "The Paradox of Choice" refers to the presentation of results in Digital Search engines, but can be referenced for colour selection.

The paradox is that having too few choices is not enough and leads to user dissatisfaction, whereas too many choices leads to information overload and inability to choose, or choice dissatisfaction.

This paradox is the interplay of many components and the text below is adapted from; ("When More Is Less: The Paradox of Choice in Search Engine Use" - Antti Oulasvirta, Janne Hukkinen, Barry Schwartz)

Phase 1: Attraction
When one first sees a result page, a large presentation or page set size can actually bear two positive effects:

Increased attraction. Seeing more items on a display increases its perceived attractiveness and may make the user start scanning it.

Increased expectations. Seeing that there are more items available increases the expectation that an excellent item will be found. You are supposed to get a perfect answer when you have many options to choose from.

Phase 2: Choice
However, negative effects emerge when the user enters the phase in which the choice is made. According to the theory, increasing consideration set size can:

Paralyze the user in the process of entertaining alternatives.

Result in poorer choice. As a result of the choice task being made more difficult, users become paralyzed and are therefore more prone to choose sub-optimally

Phase 3: Evaluation
Increasing remembered set size could do the following in relation to evaluation of the chosen item:

Dissatisfaction. A wide selection leads to a higher expectation of making the "best" choice,

Regret. With more and better options from which to choose, there is an increased perceived opportunity cost in making any selection at all. The ones that were not chosen are also better.

Considering our own industry, we know that consumers consistently refer to their reasons for not being able to confidently select color as;

1. Too many colours from which to choose;
2. Limited assistance or guidance;
3. Fear of choosing the wrong colour;
4. Fear of the final outcome; and
5. Not finding the "right" colour.

How do we deal with this conflict? How do we provide enough choice for our consumers ensuring that they feel their colour needs can/will be met by our colour system, yet not overwhelm them?

Psychological research shows that complex choices need to be managed carefully to ensure user and choice satisfaction.

As a result of further experimental work the following issues were posited as key to managing effective choice in large information sets:

1. Help narrow the consideration set, this does not mean limiting the options but rather assisting in narrowing the options down;
2. Make comparisons more effective;
3. Provide diagnostic cues; and
4. Aid in spotting diagnostic features of items.

In Colour Merchandising this could be interpreted as providing cues and triggers that allow consumers to quickly and easily slice the colour collection into smaller pieces that can be easily digested. For instance, this could include:

1. An identification system, allowing customers to rationally or intuitively navigate a palette. "Signposts" and a common language to understand what they are being presented with
2. Provide collections that allow a narrowing of the selection set. This could be to include a historical collection; a neutrals section divided into warm and cool; regional palettes; etc.
3. Explain varying effects on an environment with different colours
4. Provide trend information and ways to discuss colour choices with friends and family – the

power of knowing what other people are using should not be underestimated.

Choices, managed and embraced

Although the information above is interesting, are there examples of organisations or industries that have effectively addressed this problem?

The local library is an excellent example of dealing with vast arrays of choices yet it has the ability to satisfy consumers rather than scare them away.

When was the last time you visited a library? This is an environment in which you are faced with hundreds of thousands of choices, yet libraries are full of people confidently selecting books.

The difference here is libraries themselves are destinations, and library users are experienced at navigating the system, library users are there to fulfil a desire that provides pleasure and is not necessarily a grudge process.

So what separates a Library from a colour selection tool?

1. Process is understood.
2. Large choice that is easy to navigate – there are "signposts" and a common language.
3. The library is itself a destination – regardless of whether a selection is made.
4. There are "Top 10" selections or "Best Sellers" – providing "sure things".
5. Selecting books is not a grudge process – it's enjoyable.

So although libraries connect with "want to" consumers – people who want to be there - libraries still have a major advantage and that is they make sense. Whichever library you go to, you know how it works, yet all libraries are different in look and feel, but within seconds libraries make sense. Whereas to many consumers colour displays don't make sense, they don't have a common language and they are often not well "signposted".

The challenge is for the Paint Industry to develop processes or colour systems that appeal to the "want to" consumer and the "have to" consumer.

Not all Consumers are the same

It is well known that there are different consumer groups who can be clustered as "want to" and "have to" consumers, referring to a desire to paint due to an expected positive outcome versus those who must paint to gain an outcome that may not necessarily be a design desired outcome.

Therefore for effective colour selection systems in store we need to address the following issues:

1. Appeal to the "want to and have to" consumer, without a one size fits all solution;
2. Provide a large colour selection for "Attraction;"
3. Simplify the "Choice and Evaluation" phases;
4. Provide positive reinforcement that the selection is good;
5. Refresh the system regularly to prevent boredom without changing the "language:"
6. Make the process understandable; and,
7. Provide effective "signposting."

To bring this closer to home we need therefore to introduce the following key elements into a successful Colour System design:

- Ease of Navigation
- Meeting the needs of "want to" and "have to" consumers
- Provide colours that are "sure things"
- Use a language that is easy to understand
- Provide enough choice

In traditional consumer behaviour when a decision is made to purchase an item (dependent on the ultimate value) there are a number of phases the consumer goes through:

Problem Recognition
Information Search
Evaluation of Alternatives
Purchase
Post Purchase evaluation

In the coatings industry, the majority of this process happens in front of a colour display. The challenge that the consumer faces is not just the fact that he/she cannot feel and touch the actual product required (representational marketing) but also cannot be sure that the product (colour) will really look as expected. This coupled with all the other issues mentioned earlier is the challenge we face.

The markets served by the paint industry are so diverse there is no one solution that will meet all needs, and local market needs should always be considered. However, if Colour Systems are designed and implemented to make consumer colour selection an easier process, we will all emerge as winners.

All of these problems can be managed with sensitive Colour System design. There are numerous other elements in colour selection that need to be considered, some of these will be addressed in my next article on colour merchandising.

References

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