

WHY ASKING 'WHY' CAN BE MISLEADING

by Sean J. Jordan

It's late, and Joe has been dispatched by his pregnant wife to pick up some groceries. Chief among her requests: a jar of strawberry jam.

"Come home without it," she warns him, "and it won't be pretty."

Joe dashes to the store, makes a beeline for the correct aisle, and finds himself faced with over thirty different varieties of strawberry jam on the shelf. He realizes he has no idea which brand his wife prefers, and in his haste, he's left his cell phone at home.

Almost instinctively, Joe reaches for a jar of Smuckers, and then stops himself as his fingers wrap around it. "I'd better look at the labels," he decides, and starts comparing his options.

Joe realizes that price is the biggest differentiator, but there are also jams boasting reduced calories, or organic ingredients. One brand claims to have an improved taste while another promises fresher fruit.

Joe doesn't move. He can't. He's locked in a state of analysis paralysis, with no idea what choice he should make.

Joe's plight is common, because he's experiencing an inner argument within his own brain that's preventing him from making a decision. But this is not some simple battle between "reason" and "emotion" -- it's a complex conflict between emotional systems where reason can actually get in the way.

In the book *How We Decide*, author Jonah Lehrer explains that decisions about products are influenced by two specific regions of the brain: the nucleus accumbens (NAcc), which plays a role in the brain's reward system, and the insula, which produces aversive feelings to negative stimuli. The insula is like a screaming baby that the brain wants to shush and keep quiet; the NAcc is like a fickle lover that the brain is constantly trying to appease.

The result of all of this, Lehrer says, is that the brain is in a constant argument that is often won by the whims of the NAcc when it comes to decision-making. But the prefrontal cortex (which controls cognition and serves as a necessary balance to the hedonistic NAcc) can get in



the way and disrupt the decision. When individuals attempt to consciously analyze the reasons that they prefer something, the results can be paralyzing... and even misleading.

Consider a study led by Timothy Wilson and published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* in 1993. Wilson and his team brought in two groups of women and gave them a choice between five different posters -- two featuring fine art and three featuring humorous cat pictures. The women in the first group were simply asked to rate each poster and select their favorite, which they were allowed to take home. The second group also had to explain *why* they liked or disliked each poster. **95%** of the women in the first group selected the fine art. But only **64%** of the women in the second group made that choice. What's more, the women in the second group were significantly **more likely** to be **dissatisfied** with their choice several weeks later.

The difference, the researchers argued, was that the thinking of the second group became muddled due to the requirement of justifying their preferences. The emotional reaction of the first group resulted in top-of-mind selection and higher satisfaction. Forcing the women to justify and explain their decision resulted in a choice that was less likely to

be the satisfactory option. From a neuroscience perspective, the women made the mistake of telling their NAcc what it wanted instead of letting it be their guide.

Joe eventually goes with his gut and grabs the popular brand he'd initially been drawn to. Upon returning home, he suddenly recalls that his wife's mother had offered them this same brand with their breakfast when they'd visited for Christmas. His wife had commented then that she'd grown up eating the stuff.

Joe's emotions have remembered an important detail that will lead to a pleasant feeling of gratitude from his wife... and allow him to avert the pain of an argument.

Consumers often don't understand the entirety behind the reasons why they make decisions. That's one reason it's important to obtain top-of-mind data before delving too deep.

As with Joe, understanding the emotional component of the decision can make a world of difference in the results. **RPR**

For further reading, we recommend Jonah Lehrer's book *How We Decide* and the article 'Introspecting About Reasons Can Reduce Post-Choice Satisfaction' by Wilson, Lisle, Schooler, Hodges, Klaaren and LaFleur, published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 19 vol 3