

BY IRENE TURNBULL

HOW TO AVOID *choice overload*



Sarah and Mario set out on a Saturday morning with hopeful aspirations of choosing decorating finishes for their home. They began their day with specialty coffees and breakfast sweets at their local café. Not to be overwhelmed by the allure of choice, they each ordered something different to share. Little did they know, they had just scratched the surface of what was to be an eye opening experience into marketplace overload.

With shopping time at a premium, the couple planned to nail down selections for flooring, tile for three bathrooms and pick faucets, sinks, tubs, toilets and shower controls. They plotted their route accordingly, expecting to visit two or three sources for flooring in the morning and about three others for tile and bathroom fixtures in the afternoon. However, by flooring visit number three, their early morning optimism was quickly turning into exasperated confusion as each visit presented new options, supported by enthusiastic and often contradictory testimonials as to why each product was better than the other. Nonetheless, after refreshing over 101 lunch menu options, they pressed on to investigate the world of tile and bathroom fixtures, only to find the same process repeated for each product category. While Sarah and Mario came home with samples and information, they were more confused than ever and discouraged by the thought that there were still so many more selections for their home to be addressed, including their furnishings.

It seems we're in the midst of a social phenomenon coined "Choice Overload," which is resulting in one of the most significant stress ailments for modern consumers. From fancy coffees to expensive cars,

our marketplace offers infinite choice in every product category. Nowhere is this abundance more visible than the home building, design and decorating markets. From light switches to wall paint, doorknobs to kitchens, flooring to furniture – there is no shortage of choice. But, isn't that good? Making choices is an important part of life's evolutionary process. However, psychologists say we are also at a critical point and have evolved to accept personal responsibility for our choices, even beyond our intimate circles. We now have to be partners on a larger global scale and our desire to make the right choice – whatever our personal benchmarks might be – have led us smack into a self-imposed cloud of indecision stress! Ironically, current research clearly shows that the more choices we have, the fewer decisions we make, and the greater our dissatisfaction is with the outcome of our choice.

So, how do you make good choices in a global economy where experts have been replaced with associates and the criteria for product selection is based on low cost, flat-pack shipping and quick turnover rather than lasting quality and comfort? How is one to know what is right from the inappropriate? Part of the answer lies in clearly defining our own

values and expectations. The solutions will come when we ask the right questions before making our purchases. Here are some suggestions that work in every "snack" bracket when dealing with products for your home.

1. Values – Consider the environmental impact of your choices and their effect on your health and well being. Consider easy care, lifestyle quality, comfort and safety rather than just being influenced by the lowest price. How soon will your purchase need replacing? Is supporting your local and domestic economy of value to you? Clearly make these criteria known to suppliers serving you and be vigilant in demanding proper disclosure before making your decisions.

2. Seek out real product experts who have certifiable credentials to learn how and where to research and source goods. Professional suppliers make educational upgrading mandatory for sales and technical staff. They attend national and international trade shows and keep abreast of market innovations. Look for training and trade association membership certificates posted on showroom walls. Most major product groups have national and international trade associations that advocate for reputable suppliers and provide impartial research data. Ask for and check references and examples of actual product installations. Use the Internet for global sourcing but remember to qualify research sources. Don't confuse marketing hype for fact, or showroom assistants with product experts. Reputable manufacturers readily offer product specifications and tech support.

3. Check product warranties and be aware of limitations. Manufacturers' warranties are often restricted and subject to special

terms and conditions for installation, which if not strictly adhered to can render them void. Many discount suppliers subcontract installations to independents that have no warranty status with the manufacturer. Support for after-sales service should be a pre-purchase consideration. Experienced specialty stores often price products and installation as a package because they guarantee their products and workmanship, with the end cost actually being less expensive than those where supplies were bought on deal.

4. Don't be misled by technical jargon and marketing claims. While it is important to understand industry standards and the pros and cons of product composition, it is equally important to remember that most products for the home undergo some form of processing in order to render them usable. Bamboo is a good example. It's a product valued for its sustainability but still requires the use of glues in its manufacturing. So it may be extremely durable in a three-quarter-inch tongue and groove made with quality glues and a carbonized finish, yet may perform badly when milled with inferior glues and a top coat. Abrasion ratings for fabrics are important, but don't override the significance of resistance to fading, breaking strength and staining. Make sure you clearly understand what product claims and logos really mean. That's where real expertise is essential.

5. When it comes to style and colour, don't underestimate your own feelings. The biggest choice mistakes are often made when you defer your own gut feelings to a stranger. Make decisions based on researched facts and large samples that are viewed in your own surroundings – with your actual lighting in place. Trust your instincts. As I always say, "if it feels good it is probably right." **OH**