

## Too Much Choice is a Bad Thing

Submitted by [Che Green](#) on Jul 01, 2014 | [Advocacy Strategies](#) | [Diet and Nutrition](#) | [Farmed Animals](#) | [General Animal Protection](#) | [Vegetarianism and Veganism](#)

*Continuing our discussion of why campaign targeting is important, HRC co-founder and Executive Director Che Green explores how decision fatigue can impact responses. He also considers whether simplification of choice should be applied to animal advocacy as a whole.*

Researcher Sheena Iyengar wanted to understand choice, so she conducted an experiment. With her colleagues, she conducted taste tests at grocery stores to see if customers were affected by the number of choices available, in this case varieties of jam. Initially, the researchers found that increasing the types of jam available for tasting also increased the number of people who wanted to try at least one flavor.

The really interesting point, however, is that as the types of jam and number of taste-testers increased, the number of people who actually purchased a jar decreased. Instead of leading to more sales, giving customers too many choices seemed to overwhelm them, leading to possible “decision fatigue” and inaction. As Iyengar writes in her book, [“the fantastic variety seemed to favor browsers over buyers.”](#)

What does this mean for animal advocacy? To bolster our arguments, many advocates provide a laundry list of reasons for the target audience to change their attitudes or behavior. Our materials include sections for each of the main reasons to go vegan, to spay/neuter one’s companion, to buy cruelty-free products, etc. We include everything, hoping that something will resonate with the person we’re trying to reach.

Instead, however, we may be overwhelming those who would otherwise listen to a more focused message. While it may be easier to create a campaign covers all of the arguments and is intended to reach everyone, it may not be most effective. When choosing your campaign messages and designing your materials, try to pick your most effective messages and match them to your most receptive target audiences.

***“RESEARCHING YOUR AUDIENCE MAY REQUIRE MORE EFFORT, BUT IT’S ALSO MORE LIKELY TO RESULT IN CHANGE FOR ANIMALS.”***

Researching your audience may require more effort, but it’s also more likely to result in change for animals.<sup>1</sup> The future success of the animal protection movement will require more targeted and personalized messages, especially after we have converted the “low hanging fruit.” The more resistant someone is to changing their behavior, the more focused the message of behavior change will need to be.

Questions about choice and decision fatigue may also have implications on a more macro level, according to academic researcher Corey Wrenn. [In a recent piece](#), she argued that single-issue animal advocacy campaigns are competing interests that deluge the target audience, causing them to take no action at all because they are overwhelmed with information and choices. Dr. Wrenn writes, “Alternatively, if organizations were to simplify their claim-making and focus simply on anti-speciesism holistically, it might relieve potential audiences of the burden associated with too many competing areas of concern.”

This is an important question for animal advocates – should we continue focused campaigns or shift our limited resources to an anti-speciesism message, which in Wrenn’s view means vegan abolition? Setting aside the fact that many animal advocates are more passionate about certain issues and that many organizations are entirely focused on single issues, it’s fair to ask which approach would be more effective. In the long run, would a holistic, abolitionist emphasis create more substantive change for animals than the current focus on single-issue campaigns?

Unfortunately, I don’t know. And while Wrenn argues passionately in favor of the holistic approach, there is very little data to support it, if any. There remain too many questions about how people respond to animal advocacy messages: How many people can a vegan abolitionist message successfully convert? How long does that conversion take? Do single-issue messages have a higher conversion rate? And if you persuade someone to change on a single issue do they become more receptive to other pro-animal arguments?

In the end, I’m a firm believer that we all want the same thing for nonhuman animals. While single-issue campaigners may ask for a subset of the change that vegan abolitionists seek, both groups are contributing their efforts toward the same goal, which is to end animal suffering caused by humans. I would argue that our challenge is not to avoid single-issue arguments, but to find ways to complement and build upon those arguments to ultimately achieve a cohesive and truly humane sense of morality when it comes to animals.

After raising these thought-provoking questions, Wrenn unfortunately segues into an attack of “welfarist” organizations, accusing them of focusing on single issue campaigns primarily for fundraising purposes. Sadly, this is a common downfall of many self-described “vegan abolitionists” who model themselves after the Gary Francione school of thought. Personally, I think we can argue the effectiveness of an approach without disparaging the intentions of those with whom we disagree. Making the tent smaller does not help animals.

I have been vegan for 16 years and I am an abolitionist. I believe the ultimate goal is to end all human practices that cause animal suffering. But without evidence that a vegan abolitionist argument can convert enough people to make a real difference for animals, I think single-issue campaigns are necessary. Animal advocates are too few – and those who participate in animal suffering are too many – for us to ignore opportunities to change behavior on issues that resonate with specific audiences who are otherwise resistant to a vegan message.

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Finally, here are some practical tips to avoid decision fatigue:

- Do your outreach earlier in the day, before people have made too many other decisions, or after meals, when their decision-making glucose level have been replenished.<sup>2</sup>
- Do not include all arguments for an issue in your materials. Instead, choose 1-2 of your best arguments and tailor them to a specific audience.
- Convert people from “browsers” to “buyers” by targeting your messages and tactics to those who are receptive and encouraging specific behavior change.
- Lastly, if you disagree with another animal advocate on the best approach, do so respectfully and without belittling their motivations or their work for animals.

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### " Personally, I think we can

Submitted by cwrenn on Wed, 2014-07-02 14:21.

" Personally, I think we can argue the effectiveness of an approach without disparaging the intentions of those with whom we disagree." I agree...I appreciate you covering my article, but I wouldn't conflate my evidence-based criticism with "belittling" and "attacking," which is pejorative rhetoric designed to deflect from the arguments by focusing on tone and my personal character. This article was published in a peer-reviewed and respected academic journal. Welfarist single issue approaches are lacking solid evidence as well, with most research interested in how much financial return is earned from outreach material (see Animal Charity Evaluators). Thanks for covering my work. I explore these issues in greater detail in an upcoming book on abolitionist theory due to be published next year.

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