

Dealing with choices

By Anthony Carnovale

When I was boy, I was given very few choices inside our family home. Whatever food was on the table was the food we were expected to eat. Dinner was at 5 p.m. sharp. No excuses. Bed time? Non-negotiable. Church on Sundays? Don't even think about it. As a parent of two young children, I'm trying to follow suit by limiting the number of choices that I offer my own kids; I'm failing miserably. Because of it, my six-year-old son is a master negotiator, while my three-year-old sits off to the side watching, listening and scheming.

The 21st century is a beast when it comes to the amount of choices we're faced with. Recently, I was given a choice of over 5,000 items when I searched for a meat-thermometer on Amazon. Google spit out 15,800,000 results when I searched for information on 'civic journalism'. From online shopping and research, to the different foods that come gluten-free, fat-free, sugar free, with extra vitamin D. Your choice. Your way. From the foods we eat, to the appointments we keep, the clothes we wear, to what we watch on Netflix, Amazon or YouTube (and which of the half dozen platforms to watch it on). I can walk into any Starbucks and have my choice of over 80,000 different drink combinations. Living a rich and satisfying life means making good choices on a consistent basis (According to sources online, the average number of decisions an adult makes each day equals about 35,000). Choosing is an exhaustive business.

However, more choices don't guarantee quality. In my opinion, people don't go to Mandarin or Starbucks for the quality of the products they serve (how could they?). I think having so many choices makes people feel special. That's why we continue to put ourselves in a position to make them; but too many choices can make us unhappy and lead us to sometimes abscond from making a decision all together. Researchers call this 'choice overload.' Because we have so many options, the certainty people feel about their choice decreases; while the anticipation that they will regret their choice increases. In the end, we're never satisfied (cue the next Starbucks drink).

On October 22, the citizens of Orangeville will make a choice - elect our next local government. With three candidates for mayor, two for deputy mayor and 12 candidates for council, there's no chance of 'choice overload'. Campaigns are in full swing: signs are up; their social media accounts are active and updated regularly; some are knocking on doors.

Judging a candidate on the campaign trail is like judging a person based on their social media profile (when was the last time you put up a bad picture?) or a teacher at parent-teacher interviews (where gym teachers show up in a shirt and tie). You're going to hear all the things you want to hear; see all the things you want to see. As a rule, I don't trust people on the campaign trail. So how else do we choose?

Voting for someone because you like them is a horrible idea; voting for someone because they're 'nice' is irresponsible. To me, 'nice' is the lowest common denominator. I know plenty of nice people but I don't want them managing my tax dollars. I want somebody that's inspiring, articulate, passionate and driven. We need leaders that have a vision and a means to execute that vision. This town has to deal with some contentious issues: high taxes; drug addiction; overdoses; infrastructure; growth; and yes, global warming.

There are plenty of new faces seeking office. I've interviewed many of these candidates for a community project I'm working on. For the most part, they are young, hungry and seemingly progressive. Some are simply looking for something to do. There are some familiar faces as well, people that were a part of a council that many saw as bumbling and dysfunctional.

Even though we have more choices than ever, many still make decisions the same way- by generating a pro/con list. Here's something else you can do: In my grade nine English class, I ask my students to create a character profile on the main character of whatever story we're reading. A character profile can include: the things the character says; the things they do; the things they feel; what they look like; and, what others say about the character. Once students have completed that profile only then can they make a statement about the character in question. Judging someone based on anything less is irresponsible. So is voting for somebody because of a sign, or because they're your neighbour or your friend.

Before you vote, create a profile of the candidates. You can include things like: how they present themselves in public and online; drive by their residence and see what their property looks like; consider how they treat people with different views; consider their voting records; look up their attendance at council meetings (I have). If they knock on your door, don't ask them questions they'll be prepared for; ask them questions that will catch them off guard; ask them what they think about when they're alone; ask them where they get their news from and if they read the local papers. Ask them what they're going to do for your children or grandchildren. I know this might seem impractical, but with no scheduled debates, what other choice do we have?