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Decision Time: How to use a pro and con list to help with tough choices

By PAULA SIROIS
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Some folks find making decisions easy. Should I have this or that? No problem, I'll choose this. Should I marry this person or that person? Easy peasy, I'll pick that person. Should I become a neurosurgeon or a professional butler? Simple, simple, simple. Others find decision-making agonizing and stressful, painful even. Many make decisions by refusing to make decisions. You know, like that Rush song "Freewill": "If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice."

Many people opt to use the handy and ever helpful pro and con list. But are these lists really valuable? "What a great question for me," says Kamy Akhavan, the president of ProCon.org, a nonprofit that promotes critical thinking in a pro-con format. "Just like looking both ways before crossing the street, we should consider the pros and cons before making important decisions. Really understanding other perspectives, whether we agree with them or not, makes us more informed, better citizens and more advanced critical thinkers."

One fan of the pro and con list was none other than Benjamin Franklin. According to a famous letter he penned in 1772 to his friend Joseph Priestley, Franklin wrote about Priestley's decision to marry: "... my Way is, to divide half a Sheet of Paper by a Line into two Columns, writing over the one Pro, and over the other Con ... And tho' the Weight of Reasons cannot be taken with the Precision of Algebraic Quantities, yet when each is thus considered separately and comparatively, and the whole lies before me, I think I can judge better, and am less likely to take a rash Step."

How should you approach a pro and con list? With complete honesty and bare-boned facts:

1. Compare apples to apples: If comparing a new job offer and looking at the commute, for example, be sure to list accurate information, from the distance to the type of road traveled, like highway or back roads, and how much gas would be needed each week.
2. Don't forget the details: Be very specific in your list. Don't just write "gas roughly \$50 a week." Instead, drive the distance and do the math. Be as accurate as you can. Sometimes a decision is made by the smallest of details.
3. Be honest: Don't gloss over facts because you're heart is leaning one way or the other. Be honest with yourself, even if that means listing more negatives than you had originally realized. Same with positives. At first blush you may hate something and then with honest assessment realize there are some good points here and there.

If pro and con lists were good enough for Benjamin Franklin, surely we can benefit from them too.

Paula Sirois is a Florida-based writer who specializes in family life and frugal living for www.RetailMeNot.com, the #1 coupon site in the world.

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