Pros And Cons Approach

Idea In Short

You have probably already created a pros-and-cons list:

- New job, yes or no?
- Is the expensive Caribbean vacation a good idea?
- Should you start the multi-year training?

Hardly any other method is so popular for making decisions. Make informed decisions according to Benjamin Franklin. This article describes the limits of this list and shows a possible way out. This is based on the experience of, none other than, Benjamin Franklin!

There is hardly an easier method than the good old pros-and-cons list to make decisions. All you need is a sheet of paper with two columns for pros-and-cons. On the left, list the arguments in favor of the decision [Pros]. Similarly, list the arguments against it [Cons] on the right. Easy, isn't it?

Writing is powerful

Our brain loves to get lost in a tangle of diffuse thoughts. Can you manage to have all the arguments in your head at the same time? If so, congratulations! However, many of us find it difficult to do so. When countless arguments are in your head, it is difficult to keep an overview. Even the process of putting it on paper can be enormously illuminating. Remember the Chinese proverb:

> The faintest ink is more powerful than the strongest memory

Writing things down frees up your mental capacity for thinking and decision-making. Furthermore, this approach also adds a visual dimension to help facilitate the decision-

making process. You have created the list. However, one column is significantly longer than the other. Yet, the whole thing doesn't feel helpful than before. What good is it if you have 10 pros, but that one con gives you a ton of headache? This is where Benjamin Franklin's method may help you!

History of this method

In 1772, the theologian Joseph Priestley, having heard of his successful method for complex decisions, asked Benjamin Franklin for advice. In a letter, he described his method: To get over this, 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. Sounds like a pros-and-cons list, doesn't it? But because the process is a little more complicated.

PRO	PROBABILITY	IMPORTANCE	WEIGHT	CONS	PROBABILITY	IMPORTANCE	WEIGHT
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet	10%	60%	6%	Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet	20%	30%	6%
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet	30%	20%	6%	Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet	50%	40%	20%
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet	60%	30%	18%	Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet	40%	60%	24% ←
→ Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet	40%	80%	32%	Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet	80%	20%	16%

Pros And Cons

The Process

1. Ask yourself a clear question!

There are a variety of decision-making techniques. However, the Benjamin-Franklin method is most suitable for close-ended questions. These are questions to which you can answer with Yes or No.

> Good example: Should I accept the new job offer? Bad example: Should I go to Italy, the US or Spain during the summer vacation?

2. Find pros and cons!

A logical step that you already know from the standard pros-and-cons list: on the left you list the advantages, on the right, the arguments that speak against it. According to the Benjamin Franklin method, take your time, especially when it comes to making an important decision. Not all our thoughts are present at some point. Perhaps, you don't have to make the final decision until the end of the week instead of today. If so, spread the process over the next few days.

3. Assess the importance of the individual points!

From now on try to quantify the impact using concrete numbers. Put an end to the loose writing. Instead, tighten your thought process & sharpen your focus. The brain will rattle even more! The numbers game will cause you to sweat. But this approach has its rewards. You will finally have something tangible & worth scrutiny! However, ask yourself how important the individual points are. If possible, use a numeric scale to place relative weights, say from 1-10, with 10 an extremely important point.

4. Evaluate the probability of the pros and cons items

Next, try to predict the possibility of the individual items (pros & cons) materializing. Again, you can assign points from 1-10, where 1 is extremely unlikely and 10 is extremely certain.

5. Determine the weighs

Admittedly, Benjamin Franklin did not mention exactly how you should weigh the individual arguments. However, assessing the importance & probability are sensible & important steps. So, take your calculator or create an Excel spreadsheet to calculate the products of these numerical values. Subsequently, you will arrive at the overall weights of the arguments, both pro & con.

6. Eliminate superfluous arguments!

Now it's time to simplify! Delete the arguments with the same low score. For example, you may want to kick out half the low-ranking scores to arrive at the selection set. These low-ranking items may be important in themselves, but do not play a critical role in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, you should be extremely careful here not to have attributes a wrong importance or probability. So, double check. Next, delete the pairs that match in importance and probability in both individual values. If the list is still too long and confusing,

eliminate the pairs that only match in the overall weighting. This way, you can reliably delete the arguments to arrive at the most compelling ones, for or against a specific course of action.

7. Analyze and decide!

After you have removed the balancing arguments, it's time for a final analysis:

- Is one side significantly longer than the other? This can be a clear indication of your decision
- What is the importance of the pros compared to the importance of the cons?
- What is the probability of the pros compared to the importance of the cons?
- How are the ratings of importance and probability distributed?
- Are there any observable patterns?

Gut feeling

In the end, despite all the numbers, calculations, pondering & evaluating, you may find the pros-and-cons & the accompanying results not quite right. If so, trust your gut feeling! These questions can also help you further:

- What is the overall impression?
- Are there any factors that feel important despite conflicting numbers?
- How would I choose someone else?
- Who else can I ask?

Summary

People have always had to make decisions. Benjamin Franklin described a technique for all those who reach their limits with a normal pros-and-cons list. Are you facing a big decision? Then give it a try! Don't forget: in the end, despite all the analyses, the gut feeling can still help decide!