

Important modern issues require scientific answers

As we look back on 2007, America faces a burning unanswered question: Would we like to make that a large for a quarter more?

This is a vital national issue, because this is the time of year America goes to the movies. Personally, I'm in the middle of a family movie marathon. With the holiday film season in full swing and my oldest home from school, we've been seeing a lot of movies. Tonight will make it six nights in a row, a Fagin family record.

But one thing is getting a bit tedious. Every night, I step up to the concession stand. Every night I get a medium soda. Every night I'm asked if I'd like a large for a quarter more. Every night I say, "No, thank you".

Just how good a deal am I passing up? A couple of days ago I did an experiment.

I took three soda cups saved from previous movie outings, filled each one from the sink, and poured the water into a measuring cup. Following standard protocols for experimental error, I performed each measurement five times and took an average.

The results? A small movie cup holds 492 milliliters of liquid, suspiciously close to one pint. A medium cup holds 956 ml, suspiciously close to one quart. A large soda is 1,296 ml, suspiciously close to nothing I've ever heard of.

How much do you get for your money? A small soda costs \$3.50, giving you about 1.4 units of soda per dollar. A medium drink is \$4, rounding to 2.4 units. Not too shabby.

But for only a quarter more you can get a large, with a whopping SSF (Soda Satisfaction Factor) of 3.0. That's more than twice as much soda per dollar, for only 21 percent more. How is that possible? Think "fixed costs."

I'm not in the theater business, but I suspect most of the cost in your tasty beverage is not in the product. It's in the building to house it, the labor to pour it and other things that don't change with the soda you order. Larger drinks mean more profits for the theater, because of identical fixed costs. Hence the suggestive selling.

I know what you're thinking: What about



OPINION
BARRY FAGIN
Contributing columnist

the Ice Factor? How does the inclusion of ice affect the discriminating filmgoer's imbibatory experience? Funny you should ask.

Based on years of family nights out and careful scientific observation at the concession stand, I can state with totally inappropriate conviction that they put the same amount of ice in every cup. Ice appears to be part of the drink's fixed cost. (Ice also dilutes the soda over time, but the mathematics to model that are inappropriate for a family newspaper).

After observing scientifically that the only scoop I have in my kitchen looks half the size of one in a movie theater, I can confidently report the ice in a movie cup displaces 165 ml of soda. This changes the SSF to 0.9, 2.0 and 2.7 for a small, medium and large. If you super-size that soda, you get triple the sips for a fifth more money.

This seems like a great deal. Should the discerning cinephile take it?

Well, maybe. A large soda is a *lot* of soda, particularly if you're going to finish it in two hours. I don't know about you, but when I buy a large drink, I wind up with a lot of watery, flat soda when the credits roll. It's not a bargain if you end up throwing it away.

That's the bottom line. If you slurp to the bottom of your soda before the big chase scene, maybe you should consider getting a large for a quarter more. If you and your date usually get small drinks, switch to one large and an extra straw. You'll spend less and get more. That rarely happens in real life.

But if you find yourself drinking the last drop of a large soda just because you've already paid for it, or if you've got a tooth decay problem (what economists call an "externality"), then drop to a medium or small. Just say no to the nice employees when they offer an upgrade. They won't be offended, they're just doing their jobs.

It'd be nice, though, if they offered us a Perrier.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers may e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net