

In search of a better life: getting rid of the bad lines you get into

By Rick Maier

When I announced I was moving to Macon in 1984, friends warned me the people here were so friendly and talkative that my carton of ice cream would melt while I waited in line to check out at the supermarket.

I moved here anyway, fully expecting to develop more patience, but it was all a myth. Today, cashiers scan the goods and swipe my credit card faster than I can say paper or plastic.

Do you feel as if you spend a lot less time standing in lines these days? Maybe it's just me, but technology seems to have significantly reduced the amount of time I wait for things to happen. Of course, the fewer lines we have, the less tolerable are the ones that remain.

The Distinction Between Good and Bad Lines

The best way to improve the quality of our lives might be to eliminate waiting in line – at least the bad ones.

A “bad” line is one that we don't expect or desire – like a ninety-minute backup on I-75 on the way to Atlanta. Or it could be the result of poor service or inadequate planning – like the Taste of Downtown event (great idea, but they should have called it a Taste of Downtime for all the lines).

Good lines are the ones that we anticipate, those that we choose - like buying tickets for a big game, going to a popular performance, or visiting a special place to eat. In fact, a good line can serve to confirm that whatever we're waiting for is really worthwhile – for example, waiting a few minutes to vote. Good lines can increase the anticipation and enhance the reward.

Some waiting is just part of life these days. Waiting for a red light is okay because ignoring it could have some pretty unpleasant consequences. Waiting for my computer to boot up is a good deal because the benefits far outweigh the investment of time.

Most retailers and service providers appear to be making a real effort to speed up their service. They better, because the Internet is such a quick, convenient and cheap alternative.

Worst lines involve travel

I get easily frustrated sitting at idle in my car, so tolerable traffic conditions are one of the great things about living in Macon for me. We enjoy several extra hours of quality time every week with family and friends that people in bigger cities spend in traffic.

The most frustrating delays and lines seem to involve vacations – busy airports, big crowds and thirty-minute lines for a two-minute ride on Dumbo at Disney.

One of my pet peeves is waiting for the security check at airports. I think the whole thing is nonsense – despite enormous costs, the effort stands no chance of stopping a determined terrorist. Where would a hijacker demand to land a jet these days anyway? Society as a whole would be better off re-deploying all those resources into Habitat for Humanity.

Sorry, back to Middle Georgia.

Thank goodness we don't have any toll roads. Many of our Northeastern brethren spend several minutes a day waiting to give some toll taker their money, most of which goes to take care of the toll taker for the time they spend making people wait.

To avoid driving around, we increasingly call 800 numbers for service and help. You have no idea what city you're calling or how long the wait will be, but it's their nickel. I try to use a speakerphone so that I can do something else while I'm listening to the steady repetition of how important my call is to them.

How to deal with lines

The only advice I can offer about avoiding lines is to plan ahead and consider tipping where appropriate. And always be ready to convert waiting into productive time by carrying around a cell phone, a laptop and something good to read.

But wait a minute.

Why don't I feel more relaxed if I am spending so much less time in lines? What if lines aren't so bad after all? Maybe long waits are good for the soul – they give us time to think, meet other people and wind down.

I just can't remember making any friends waiting in line at the drivers license office, or coming up with any brilliant thoughts during a flight delay. All I do when I'm waiting on others is stress out thinking about how little they value my time.

If only doctors' offices made an effort to get us in and out as quickly as a supermarket!

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