"Why Waiting Is Torture"
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Why Waiting Is Torture

Alex Stone

Some years ago, executives at a Houston airport faced a troubling customer-relations issue. Passengers were lodging an inordinate number of complaints about the long waits at baggage claim. In response, the executives increased the number of baggage handlers working that shift. The plan worked: the average wait fell to eight minutes, well within industry benchmarks. But the complaints persisted.

Puzzled, the airport executives undertook a more careful, on-site analysis. They found that it took passengers a minute to walk from their arrival gates to baggage claim and seven more minutes to get their bags. Roughly 88 percent of their time, in other words, was spent standing around waiting for their bags.

So the airport decided on a new approach: instead of reducing wait times, it moved the arrival gates away from the main terminal and routed bags to the outermost carousel. Passengers now had to walk six times longer to get their bags. Complaints dropped to near zero.

This story hints at a general principle: the experience of waiting, whether for luggage or groceries, is defined only partly by the objective length of the wait. "Often the psychology of queuing is more important than the statistics of the wait itself," notes the M.I.T. operations researcher Richard Larson, widely considered to be the world's foremost expert on lines. Occupied time (walking to baggage claim) feels shorter than unoccupied time (standing at the carousel). Research on queuing has shown that, on average, people overestimate how long they've waited in a line by about 36 percent.

This is also why one finds mirrors next to elevators. The idea was born during the post-World War II boom, when the spread of high-rises led to complaints about elevator delays. The rationale behind the mirrors was similar to the one used at the Houston airport: give people something to occupy their time, and the wait will feel shorter. With the mirrors, people could check their hair or slyly ogle other passengers. And it worked: almost overnight, the complaints ceased.

The drudgery of unoccupied time also accounts in large measure for the popularity of impulse-buy items, which earn supermarkets about $5.5 billion annually. The tabloids and packs of gum offer relief from the agony of waiting.