

Get in Line Community Comment: Mike Goldsby August 15, 2013

I had opportunities to travel this summer and when you are a tourist, you have a lot of opportunities to get in line. Get in line at the airport, check your luggage, get in line for security screening, get in line to get something to eat and the list goes on.

I realize I manage some lines just fine. "Relax. There's nothing you can do about it. We will get our turn." But sometimes I do not handle it as well. "What's the holdup? This is taking forever. This place is poorly run."

I read an article in the New York Times titled "*Why Waiting is Torture*", written by Alex Stone. He quoted a number of researchers from M.I.T. and the Harvard Business School and Disneyland Executives, experts in the psychology of queuing.

The actual time you wait in line is important but the psychology of the wait is important as well. Stone says occupied time, like walking to the baggage carousel, feels shorter than unoccupied time, standing at the carousel waiting for your baggage to pop out.

Supermarkets know this. That is why they line the checkout stands with impulse-buy items. People grab a pack of gum or a magazine just to deal with the frustration of unoccupied waiting time.

Two researchers found that people prefer a short, slow moving line to a longer yet faster moving line. Disneyland is designed to hide the length of their lines by wrapping them around displays, out of sight. Every line appears to be a short line.

But the author maintains one of the biggest influences on our feelings is our sense of fairness. Americans prefer a single line, first come first served. That is preferable to a multi queue set-up, like in a grocery store. You know how it feels to be pushing your cart and look over the lines in the check-out stands, trying to figure out which one will move the quickest.

Once you pick a check-out line, suddenly everything seems unfair. Why is that line moving faster than mine? Why does that guy have so many coupons? Does it really matter if that is a tangerine or a mandarin orange? Just ring it up.

The sense of fairness really comes into play when people attempt to cut into line, ahead of their turn. A few years back, I was with a group of others waiting to enter the BV Winery tasting room. A limousine pulled up, the driver went inside and a moment later his well-dressed passengers went to the head of the line and into the winery. Without saying a word, everyone who had been patiently waiting got in their cars and drove away. It wasn't fair.

Our expectation of how long we will wait really effects our perception of the experience. I get to the airport with hours to spare because I expect to be held up checking bags or going through security. When it goes smoothly, I am happy and when it doesn't I am still not too upset, because I expect a long wait.

I found an article written by David Maister titled "*The Psychology of Waiting Lines.*" The article said an unexplained wait seems longer than an explained wait. Do any air travel, especially through San Francisco, and you will very likely experience a wait. Having any communication from staff helps, but more often you are left in the dark.

I personally tolerate standing in line better than I tolerate waiting in traffic. Sitting in a car, engine running, getting nowhere definitely makes me feel like my life is slipping away before my eyes.

We were coming home from the Bay Area, driving north on 101 through Willits. It was the day after Reggae on the River so the traffic going south was backed up for miles, barely moving. It amused me to think that there were probably a few bypass protesters stuck in that traffic. Stalled traffic is not good for the environment either; engines running, exhaust emissions. I wondered how they were handling that wait.

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment