Stat Watch

62%

Multitasking 101

Fully 62% of the web windows that college students open on their laptops during class are completely unrelated to the class, according to a study by **James M. Kraushaar** and **David C. Novak**, of the University of Vermont. Unsurprisingly, the students who allocate their cognitive resources this way get lower grades than their more attentive peers. Instant messaging is an "especially virulent" distraction, the researchers say.

OPERATIONS *by Ryan W. Buell and Michael I. Norton*

Think Customers Hate Waiting? Not So Fast...

How often have you found yourself staring at your computer screen as a progress bar tracks the machine's fitful loading of an application or completion of a search and wondered, "What's taking so long?" Good managers worry about wait time because a great deal of evidence (not to mention common sense) suggests that reducing it can increase customer satisfaction. Our research, however, demonstrates that a different approach—simply showing people what *is* taking so long— gets better results. Customers find waiting more tolerable when they can see the work being done on their behalf—and they tend to value the service more.

This holds true even when what's shown is merely the *appearance* of effort. What we term the labor illusion—a demonstration of effort, whether literal or not, expended to meet the customer's request—can be so effective, in fact, that many customers who endure waits but see a running tally of tasks end up happier than those who don't have to wait at all. People even prefer waiting with the labor illusion to playing an interactive game of tic-tac-toe.

In one experiment we conducted, participants searched on a simulated travel website for a flight. Some watched the typical boring progress bar. Others could see each airline being canvassed. The second service received higher ratings, even when those using it were forced to wait for as long as a minute. In another experiment, each participant booked the same trip through two different sites and received identical results. One site delivered the results instantly but invisibly, whereas the other took either 30 or 60 seconds but showed the labor being done. A majority preferred the transparent—and slower—site.

Can the labor illusion trump poor results? To find out, we created a fictitious online dating site and gave some participants good outcomes (extremely attractive "soul mates") and others disappointing ones (decidedly less appealing prospects). We found that people valued transparency only when their "matches" were at least decent looking; forcing them to wait and then delivering duds made them dislike the service even when they could track the matchmaking process. ("You went through all that work and found *him?*")

Many of us have already experienced the labor illusion online: The travel website Kayak, for example, shows customers each airline it searches. We'll increasingly encounter it in other environments as well. Apple recently augmented its automated voice response system with the prerecorded sound of typing, creating the impression that the digital operator is physically keying in the caller's query. ATMs at the Spanish bank BBVA show an animation of bills being counted as customers wait for the machines to spit out their cash. The U.S. Postal Service has installed screens that show customers each step being taken by the postal worker who is helping them. Starbucks now requires that baristas steam milk for each drink individually—a process that increases wait time but allows customers to see what's going on.

Transparency has long been heralded as a virtue in accounting and public relations. Our research suggests that operations can reap important bottom-line benefits from it as well. **HBR Reprint** F1105B

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