

Efficiency and Calculability

Consumers 1

Chapter 2 dealt largely with the organizations and systems that have been the precursors of the process of McDonaldization. As we saw, they include bureaucracies, concentration camps, industrial organizations, suburban communities, shopping centers, and, of course, fast-food restaurants. Needless to say, people exist in these settings. It is the norm to distinguish between two types of people in these settings: consumers (or customers, clients) and producers (or workers). We will adhere to that norm in the next four chapters. This chapter and the next will deal with consumers, while Chapters 5 and 6 will be devoted to producers. However, more and more scholars are rejecting the binary distinction between producers and consumers and thinking more in terms of “prosumers,” or those who both produce and consume.¹ We will have more to say about prosumers at several points in this book, but for the time being we will set that concept aside and deal separately with consumers and producers.

This chapter deals with consumers in terms of two of the four basic dimensions of McDonaldization: efficiency and calculability. Chapter 4 does the same with the other two dimensions of McDonaldization: predictability and control. While the focus is on the consumer, workers—the producers—will inevitably be touched on in these chapters and discussions.

We will deal with a wide array of consumers in the next two chapters including tourists, students, campers, diners, patients, parents, mothers-to-be, shoppers (including cybershoppers), dieters, exercisers, and those looking for dates (or for only sex).

Efficiency: Drive-Throughs and Finger Foods

Efficiency is perhaps the dimension of McDonaldization most often linked to the seeming increase in the pace of contemporary life. Increasing efficiency is behind just-in-time production, faster service, streamlined operations, and tight schedules everywhere—from the workplace, to Disney World, to the home.

Efficiency is generally a good thing. It is clearly advantageous to consumers, who are able to obtain what they need more quickly with less effort. Similarly, efficient workers are able to perform their tasks more rapidly and easily. Managers and owners gain because more work gets done, more customers are served, and greater profits are earned. But as is the case with McDonaldization in general, and each of its dimensions, irrationalities such as surprising inefficiencies and the dehumanization of consumers and workers emerge from the drive for increased efficiency.

Efficiency means choosing the optimum means to a given end. However, the truly optimum means to an end is rarely found. People and organizations rarely maximize because they are hampered by such factors as the constraints of history, financial circumstances, organizational realities, and the limitations of human nature.² Nevertheless, organizations continue to strive for maximization in the hope that they will at least increase their efficiency.

In a McDonaldized society, people rarely search for the best means to an end on their own; rather, they rely on previously discovered and institutionalized means. Thus, when people start a new job, they are not expected to figure out for themselves how to do the work most efficiently. Instead, they undergo training designed to teach them what has been discovered over time to be the most efficient way of doing the work. Once on the job, people may discover little tricks that help them perform the task more efficiently, and these days, they are encouraged to pass this information on to management so that all workers performing that task can perform a bit more efficiently. In this way, over time, efficiency (and productivity) gradually increases. In fact, much of the economic boom in the late 20th and early 21st centuries was attributed to dramatic increases in efficiency and productivity that permitted growth with little inflation. Even after the onset of the Great Recession beginning in late 2007, efficiency increased, but this time as employers discovered ways of producing as much, or more, with fewer and fewer employees.

Although the fast-food restaurant certainly did not create the yearning for efficiency, it has helped turn efficiency into an increasingly universal reality. Many sectors of society have had to change to operate in the efficient manner demanded by those accustomed to life in the drive-through lane of the fast-food restaurant. While many manifestations of efficiency can be traced directly to the influence of the fast-food restaurant, many more of them predate and helped shape the fast-food restaurant. Nonetheless, they all play a part in the preoccupation with efficiency fueled by McDonaldization.

Streamlining the Process

In this section we will discuss efficiency under three broad headings: streamlining the process, simplifying the product, and putting customers to work.

The Fast-Food Industry: Speeding the Way From Secretion to Excretion

As pointed out in the preceding chapter, Ray Kroc was obsessed with streamlining processes in McDonald's in order to increase efficiency not only for lining up, but also for those who consume the food. For example, the process of getting diners into and out of the fast-food restaurant has been streamlined in various ways. McDonald's has done "everything to speed the way from secretion to excretion."³ Parking lots adjacent to the restaurant offer readily available parking spots. It's a short walk to the counter, and although customers sometimes have to wait in line, they can usually quickly order, obtain, and pay for their food. The highly limited menu makes the diner's choice easy, in contrast to the many choices available in other restaurants. ("Satellite" and "express" locations are even more streamlined.) With the food obtained, it is but a few steps to a table and the beginning of the "dining experience." With little inducement to linger, diners generally eat quickly and then gather the leftover paper, Styrofoam, a plastic, discarding them in a nearby trash receptacle, and get back in their cars close to the next (often McDonaldized) activity.

Those in charge of fast-food restaurants discovered that the drive-through window made this whole process far more efficient. Instead of requiring diners to undergo the "laborious" and "inefficient" process of parking the car, walking to the counter, waiting in line, ordering, paying, carrying the food to the table, eating, and disposing of the remnants, the drive-through window offered diners the streamlined option of driving to the window and driving off with the meal. Diners could eat while driving if they wanted to be even more efficient. The drive-through window is also efficient for the fast-food restaurant. As more and more people use the drive-through window, fewer parking spaces, tables, and employees are needed. Furthermore, consumers take their debris with them as they drive away, thereby reducing the need for trash receptacles and employing to empty those receptacles periodically.

Modern technology offers further advances in streamlining. Here is a description of some of the increased efficiency at a Taco Bell in California:

Inside, diners in a hurry for tacos and burritos can punch up their own orders on a touch-screen computer. Outside, drive-through customers see a video monitor flash back a list of their orders to avoid mistakes. They then can pay using a pneumatic tube like those many banks employ for drive-up transactions. Their food, and their change, is waiting for them when they pull forward to the pickup

window. And if the line of cars grows too long, a Taco Bell worker will wade in with a wireless keyboard to take orders.⁴

Similarly, McDonald's is planning to use such touch screens in Europe and to use them to streamline the process of ordering and paying for food by eliminating counter people and cashiers.⁵

To further increase efficiency, an increasing number of fast-food restaurants are accepting credit and debit cards.

Home Cooking (and Related Phenomena): "I Don't Have Time to Cook"

In the early 1950s, the dawn of the era of the fast-food restaurant, the major alternative to fast food was the home-cooked meal, made mostly from ingredients purchased beforehand at various local stores and early supermarkets. This was clearly a more efficient way of preparing meals than earlier methods, such as hunting game and gathering fruits and vegetables. Cookbooks also made a major contribution to efficient home cooking. Instead of inventing a dish every time a meal was prepared, the cook could follow a recipe and thus more efficiently produce the dish.

Soon, the widespread availability of the home freezer led to the expanded production of frozen foods. The most efficient frozen food was (and for some still is) the "TV dinner." Swanson created its first TV dinner, its meal-in-a-box, in 1953 and sold 25 million in the first year.⁶ The large freezer also permitted other efficiencies, such as making a few trips to the market for enormous purchases rather than making many trips for small ones.

Meals from the freezer began to seem comparatively inefficient, however, with the advent of microwavable meals.⁷ Microwaves usually cook faster than other ovens, and people can prepare a wider array of foods in them. Perhaps most important, microwave ovens spawned a number of food products (including microwavable soup, pizza, hamburgers, fried chicken, French fries, and popcorn) reminiscent of the fare people have learned to love in fast-food restaurants. For example, one of the first microwavable foods produced by Hormel was an array of biscuit-based breakfast sandwiches popularized by McDonald's with its Egg McMuffin.⁸ As one executive put it, "Instead of having a breakfast sandwich at McDonald's, you can pick one up from the freezer of your grocery store."⁹ In some ways, "homemade" fast foods seem more efficient than the versions offered by fast-food restaurants. Instead of getting into the car, driving to the restaurant, and returning home, people need only pop their favorite foods into the microwave. However, the microwaved meal requires a prior trip to the market.

Supermarkets have long been loaded with other kinds of products that increase efficiency for those who want to "cook" at home. Instead of starting

from scratch, the cook can use prepackaged mixes to make "homemade" cakes, pies, pancakes, waffles, and many other foods. In fact, entire meals are now available right out of the box. Dinny Moore's Classic Bakes are entire casserole dinners (e.g., beef stew and biscuits) for four to five people and promise to be "hot and hearty, quick and convenient, ready in minutes."

An increasingly important competitor is the fully cooked meal consumers may now buy at the supermarket. People can merely stop on the way home and purchase prepackaged main courses and even entire meals, which they "prepare" by unwrapping the packages—no cooking required.

The McDonaldization of food preparation and consumption also encompasses the booming diet industry. Losing weight is normally difficult and time-consuming, but diet books promise to make it easier and quicker. The preparation of low-calorie food has also been streamlined. Instead of cooking diet foods from scratch, dieters may now purchase an array of prepared foods in frozen or microwavable form. Those who do not wish to go through the inefficient process of eating these diet meals can consume products such as diet shakes and bars (Slim-Fast, for example) in a matter of seconds. Dieters seeking even greater efficiency have access to various pills that expedite weight loss—the now-banned "fen-phen" and the still available Xenical. Then there is cosmetic surgery and even more radical and invasive steps such as gastric bypass surgery. The issue of dieting points to new efficiencies outside the home as well, that is, to the growth of diet centers such as Jenny Craig, Nutrisystem,¹⁰ Weight Watchers, and Curves (really an exercise center with a highly efficient 30-minute workout).¹¹ (There are now even a large number of apps available on smartphones dealing with weight loss and health that can be accessed easily and that make weight loss even more efficient.) Nutrisystem sells dieters, at substantial cost, prepackaged freeze-dried food.

Shopping: Creating Ever-More Efficient Selling Machines

Shopping for all kinds of goods and services, not just food, has also been streamlined. The department store obviously is a more efficient place in which to shop than a series of specialty shops dispersed throughout the city or suburbs. The shopping mall increases efficiency by bringing a wide range of department stores and specialty shops under one roof.¹² It is cost-efficient for retailers because the collection of shops and department stores brings in throngs of people ("mall synergy"). And it is efficient for consumers because, in one stop, they can visit numerous shops, have lunch at a "food court" (likely populated by many fast-food chains), see a movie, have a drink, and go to an exercise or diet center.

The drive for shopping efficiency did not end with the malls. 7-Eleven and its clones (for example, Circle K, Ampm, and Wawa) have become drive-up, if

not drive-through, minimarkets. For those customers who need only a few items, pulling up to a highly streamlined 7-Eleven (more than 53,000 locations worldwide¹³) is far more efficient (albeit more costly) than running into a supermarket. Shoppers have no need to park in a large lot, obtain a cart, wheel through myriad aisles in search of needed items, wait in lines at the checkout, and then tote purchases back to a sometimes distant car. At 7-Eleven, they can park right in front and quickly find what they need. Like the fast-food restaurant, which offers a highly circumscribed menu, 7-Eleven has sought to fill its shops with a limited array of commonly sought goods: bread, milk, cigarettes, aspirin, even videos, and self-serve items such as hot coffee, hot dogs, microwaved sandwiches, cold soda, and Slurpees. 7-Eleven's efficiency stems from the fact that it ordinarily sells only one brand of each item, with many items unobtainable.

Even more efficient are the quick and convenient Brew Thrus, a small chain based in North Carolina. Customers simply drive into a Brew Thru, which is set up like a garage lined on both sides with many convenience store products, especially beer (including kegs) and wine. An attendant comes out to the car to take your order, brings you what you want, and takes your money, and you are back on the road in no time.¹⁴

For greater selection, consumers must go to the relatively inefficient supermarket. Of course, supermarkets have sought to make shopping more efficient by institutionalizing automated self-checkout lanes (see below) and 15-item-limit, no-checks-accepted lines for consumers who might otherwise frequent the convenience stores.

Consumers who do not feel that they have the time to visit the mall are able to shop from the comfort of their homes through catalogs (for example, L.L. Bean or Lands' End), but much more importantly through online sites such as Amazon.com, Overstock.com, and Zappos.com.¹⁵ Another alternative to visiting the mall is home television shopping. The efficiency of shopping via catalogs, on TV, and especially online is increased even further with express package delivery systems, such as FedEx and UPS.

The Internet is the most important factor in greatly increased shopping efficiency. For example, instead of traveling to a book superstore (dying as evidenced by the 2011 bankruptcy and closing of all Borders superstores and the difficulties being experienced by Barnes & Noble) or wandering from one small bookshop (also dying) to another, you can access Amazon.com and millions of different titles at your fingertips.¹⁶ After selecting and charging the titles you want, you just sit back and wait for the books to be delivered to your door, usually within a day or two. The advent of e-books and e-readers such as Amazon's Kindle have made shopping for books infinitely more efficient since the books are now ordered and downloaded almost instantaneously. In fact, for the first time, Amazon sold more books via Kindle in 2011 than it did both

hardcover and paperback print books.¹⁷ Similarly instantaneous is downloading music on iTunes and similar sites.

Of course, there are innumerable other Internet sites (e.g., Overstock.com where one can efficiently shop for virtually anything. Then there is eBay.com which allows buyers and sellers to deal with one another in a highly efficient manner. (We will have a lot more to say about eBay from the point of view of McDonaldization and deMcDonaldization in Chapter 9.) "Virtual pharmacies" allow people to obtain prescription drugs without seeing a physician; consultations with "online doctors" are also available via, for example, InteractiveMD.¹⁸

An often overlooked aspect of the efficiency of cybershopping is that it can be done while you are at work.¹⁹ Although employers are likely to feel that shopping from work adversely affects worker efficiency, it is certainly very efficient from the perspective of the worker/consumer.

Of course, the drive to make Internet shopping ever more efficient continues. There are now shopping robots, or "online comparison services," that automatically surf the Web for specific products, lowest prices, and shortest delivery dates.²⁰ For example, Google.com has "Google Product Search": "Browse by category—apparel, computers, flowers, whatever—or enter a query term, and it will present a list of matching products, each with a thumbnail sketch on the left and description, price and retailer on the right."²¹ However, it has not become even more efficient just to go to Amazon.com, which has virtually everything; one might want at competitive prices and without the need for online comparison price services.

All types of shopping, but particularly ordering from distant merchants have become far more efficient with the widespread use of credit cards.

Higher Education: Multitasking in McUniversity

In the contemporary university (now often dubbed "McUniversity"); students (the consumers in a university) are increasingly able to be more efficient in class by using their laptops and smartphones to multitask in various ways. This can be educationally beneficial when it involves doing relevant Google searches during a lecture, but it can have adverse effects when students are playing games online, writing on someone's Facebook wall, or texting on their smartphones. Also worth noting is RateMyProfessors.com where students can efficiently evaluate their professors as well as find ratings by other students.

Wikipedia has become an efficient source of information for both professor and students. There was a time when most professors were critical of the use of Wikipedia, but more and more have come to embrace it. They use it themselves and allow, even encourage, their students to use it.

One other academic efficiency worth noting is the ability of students to purchase already completed term papers online. A variety of websites²³ now promise to deliver original, customized research papers on any topic for a “low, low fee” of, say, \$12.99 per page. You could (although it is not advised) purchase a 10-page paper on McDonaldization on one website for less than \$130.²⁴ Websites even have quick service and express delivery available (\$14.99 per page if you need the paper in 48 hours) for those students who have put off academic dishonesty to the last moment. Beware, however, for there are also other websites (e.g., Turnitin.com) that help professors detect plagiarism, thereby combating student gains in efficiency through plagiarism with an efficient system to detect it.²⁵

Health Care: Docs-in-a-Box

It might be assumed that modern medicine and its consumers—the patients—are immune to the drive for efficiency and invulnerable to rationalization more generally. However, medicine has been McDonaldized.

Perhaps the best example of the increasing efficiency of medical practice in the United States is the growth of walk-in/walk-out surgical or emergency centers such as DR (Duane Reade) Walk-In Medical Care clinics in New York City.²⁶ “McDoctors,” or “docs-in-a-box,” serve patients who want highly efficient medical care. Each center handles only a limited number of minor problems but with great dispatch. Although stitching a patient with a minor laceration cannot be done as efficiently as serving a customer a hamburger, many of the same principles apply. For instance, it is more efficient for the patient to walk in without an appointment than to make an appointment with a regular physician and wait until that time arrives. For a minor emergency, such as a slight laceration, walking through a McDoctor’s office is more efficient than working your way through a large hospital’s emergency room. Hospitals are set up to handle serious problems for which efficiency is not (yet) the norm, although some hospitals already employ specialized emergency room physicians and teams of medical personnel. Docs-in-a-box are also more efficient than private doctors’ offices because they are not structured to permit the kind of personal (and therefore inefficient) attention patients expect from their private physicians.

A more recent development is minute clinics found in pharmacies (e.g., CVS) and even in supermarkets, discounters, and big-box stores.²⁷ These may be staffed by nurse practitioners and physician assistants and offer efficient help in the case of minor medical matters. It has become increasingly common to get flu shots in a neighborhood pharmacy or supermarket (perhaps offered near the meat department and by a butcher—just kidding!).

Entertainment: Moving People (and Trash) Efficiently

Many people no longer deem it efficient to trek to their local theater to see a movie. For a time, DVDs, and the stores that rented them, boomed. Blockbuster, at one time the largest video rental firm in the United States, considered “itself the McDonald’s of the video business.”²⁸ However, Blockbuster went bankrupt in late 2010.

The video rental business was transformed by more efficient alternatives (One example is the video rental machine. Redbox—once owned by McDonald’s—is the major player in this area. However, this pales in comparison to the streaming of movies from companies such as Netflix (Redbox has a similar system, as do Amazon.com, iTunes, and Blockbuster) or even streaming them free, either legally or illegally. Then there are the pay-per-view movies offered by many cable companies. And there is Hulu.com, which allows people to download, for a fee, any of its catalog of current prime-time TV shows (classic TV programs, movies, documentaries, and so on).²⁹ These can be viewed not only at home but on a variety of mobile systems. DVRs and TiVo permit customers to record their favorite shows while they are watching something else or to rewind or pause live television. For those not satisfied with just a single offering, there is “picture-in-a-picture,” which enables them to view a movie while also watching a favorite TV show on an inset on the screen. Then there are the satellite networks that allow you to watch several football games at once; with DISH’s “NFL RedZone,” one is able to watch all games when the ball is within the opponent’s 20-yard line.

Another sort of efficiency in the entertainment world is the system for moving people developed by modern amusement parks, particularly Disney and Disney World.³⁰ A system of roads filters thousands of cars each day into the appropriate parking lots. Jimmies whisk visitors to the gates of the park. Once in the park, they find themselves in a vast line of people on what is, in effect, a huge conveyor belt that leads them from one ride or attraction to another. Once they actually reach an attraction, a conveyance such as a car, boat, submarine, plane, rocket, or moving walkway moves them rapidly through and out of the attraction.

Disney World has been victimized by its own success: Even its highly efficient systems cannot handle the hordes that descend on the park at the height of the tourist season. Since 1999, Disney has sought to deal with this problem with its FASTPASS system that allows a visitor to arrange a specific time to be at a given attraction and to enter via a separate and much faster-moving FASTPASS line. Of course, there are limits on the number of FASTPASSES that can be issued. It should be self-defeating if every visitor used a FASTPASS for every trip to every attraction. There are still long lines at Disney resorts, and even the FASTPASS

times may not be so fast. In an effort to further increase efficiency and reduce wait times, Disney introduced the FastPass system in 2011, which allows visitors to reserve times in advance for up to three attractions.³¹

People are not the only things Disney World must process efficiently.³² The throngs of visitors who frequent such amusement parks eat a great deal (mostly fast food, especially finger foods) and therefore generate an enormous amount of trash. If Disney World emptied trash receptacles only at the end of each day, the barrels would be overflowing most of the time. To prevent this eyesore (and it must be prevented since order and cleanliness—some would say sterility—are key components of the McDonaldized world in general and Disney World in particular), hordes of employees constantly sweep, collect, and empty trash. To take a specific example, bringing up the rear in the nightly Disney parade is a group of cleaners who almost instantly dispose of whatever trash and animal droppings have been left behind. Within a few minutes, they have eliminated virtually all signs that a parade has just passed by. Disney World also employs an elaborate system of underground tubes. Garbage receptacles are emptied into this system, which whisks the trash away at about 60 miles per hour to a central trash-disposal plant far from the view of visitors. Disney World is a “magic kingdom” in more ways than one. Here is the way one observer compares another of the modern, highly rational amusement parks—Busch Gardens—to ancestors such as county fairs and Coney Island: “Gone is the dusty midway. . . . In its place is a vast, self-contained environment . . . endowed with the kind of *efficiency* beyond the reach of most cities” (italics added).³³

Online and Smartphone Dating: Show Your Interest With Just a “Wink”

For young people, dating has become “dated,” inefficient in an era in which they can simply “hang out” together, or “hook up.” However, hanging out becomes less possible as people grow a bit older. Dating is a highly inefficient process that has been streamlined as a result of the Internet and the ability to find and make dates on online services such as eHarmony.com and Match.com.³⁴ (For those who are more interested in sex than the less efficient process of dating, there are sites such as www.findsex.com and Craigslist Casual Encounters.³⁵) With a single click, one can find men or women within a specified age group and a given distance from one’s zip code (no long, unnecessary trips needed). Key words are provided on the site (e.g., *charming*, *energetic*), making it easier to find a particular kind of person. It is possible to scroll quickly through hundreds of profiles of potential dates who meet given criteria. Once a profile of interest is located, a simple click indicates a “wink” at a potential date. Other clicks can organize potential dates into

“favorites,” list so that, if one possibility does not pan out, another can be located quickly and contacted.

If a date is chosen, it is likely that sooner or later, the relationship will not work out. Once that happens, it is possible to block the spurned suitor’s access to one’s profile. Best of all, a person can be back on the dating scene in an instant with a plethora of alternatives on the website or on one’s favorites list. Even more recent and efficient is the use of smartphones and mobile dating services, relevant apps, and geo-locating technology to find a date. This can be done on the go; one no longer needs to be tied to a computer. As a result, dates can be arranged even more quickly and efficiently.

Other Settings: Ten Steps to Spiritual Maturity

Modern health clubs, including chains such as Bally Total Fitness, Gold’s Gym, and 24 Hour Fitness also strongly emphasize efficiency.³⁶ These clubs often offer virtually everything needed by clients to lose weight and stay in shape, including exercise machines, a running track, and a swimming pool. The exercise machines are highly specialized so that people can efficiently work specific areas of the body. Running machines, StairMasters, elliptical runners, and recumbent spinners increase cardiovascular fitness; weight-lifting machines increase strength and muscularity in targeted areas of the body. Many machines keep track of exactly how many calories are being burned away. People can watch TV, read, or listen to music while working out.³⁷

Other examples of streamlining to increase efficiency abound. Drive-through windows, and ATMs streamline banking for consumers (and bankers). Smartphones allow people to snap pictures and send them instantaneously to others with similar phones (or to e-mail accounts). At gasoline stations, customers put their credit cards into a slot and have no contact with, or work done by, anyone working for the gas station. In the case of ExxonMobil’s “Speedpass,” a transponder attached to a key tag or to a vehicle’s rear window communicates with the pump via radio frequency signals (a similar technology is now used on most of the nation’s toll roads). When the car pulls up, the pump is activated, and the correct amount is charged to the driver’s credit card account. Of growing importance is the ability to pay for things via the cell phone.

Even religion has been streamlined, with drive-in churches and televised religious programs.³⁸ Christian bookstores are stocked with “how-to” books explaining to be able to teach us the 10 steps to ‘spiritual maturity’ or how to be a successful parent in 60 minutes.”³⁹

Search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, and Bing now do a lot of the work that was formerly performed by computer users.⁴⁰ In the early days of the Internet, getting the information one wanted was a difficult matter requiring a

great deal of skill and knowledge of arcane computer programs. Now, all users need to do is access the search engine and type in the desired topics, and they are on their way. A process of de-skilling has taken place; users no longer need to have many skills—they are now built into the system. More recently, folksonomies such as Delicious, Flickr, YouTube, and Digg enable people to search efficiently using collaboratively created tags. Tagging is a process whereby users attach short (usually one-word) descriptions to things like photos on Flickr. If you wanted to find a Flickr picture of a clown riding a bike, you could type “clown” and “bike,” and all the photographs with those two “tags” would be displayed.

The Internet also renders such activities as political campaigning⁴¹ and medical symposia⁴² more efficient. Even more obviously, e-mail is far more streamlined than “snail mail.”⁴³ Instead of writing a letter, all that is needed are a few keystrokes (one is limited to 140 of them on Twitter). Better yet, if both you and the person you are e-mailing are simultaneously using the same Internet chat service (for example, Google Hangouts), you can have a “conversation” online without any need to send even an e-mail. A similar set of advantages has attracted people to e-cards for birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and the like.⁴⁴

Texting is not only an efficient method of communication but has brought with it a great streamlining of speech among and between people. As a result, ever shorter ways of saying things are emerging, including such common shorthand as *gtg* = got to go; *lol* = laugh out loud; and *sup* = what’s up and emoticons such as :-) = smile and ;) = wink.

Simplifying the Product

Another way to increase efficiency is by simplifying products. For example, complex foods based on sophisticated recipes are, needless to say, not the norm at fast-food restaurants. The staples of the industry are foods (e.g., hamburgers, slice of pizza) that require relatively few ingredients and are simple to prepare, serve, and eat. In fact, fast-food restaurants generally serve “finger food,” food that can be eaten without utensils.

Many innovations over the years have greatly increased the number and types of finger foods available. The Egg McMuffin is an entire breakfast—eggs, Canadian bacon, English muffin—combined into a handy sandwich. Devouring such a sandwich is far more efficient than sitting down with knife and fork and eating a plate full of eggs, bacon, and toast. The creation of the Chicken McNugget, perhaps the ultimate finger food, reflects the fact that chicken is pretty inefficient as far as McDonald’s is concerned. The bones, gristle, and skin that are such a barrier to the efficient consumption of chicken have all been eliminated in the Chicken McNugget. Customers can pop the bite-sized morsels

of fried chicken into their mouths even as they drive. Were they able to, mass purveyors of chicken would breed a more efficiently consumed chicken free of bones, gristle, and skin.⁴⁵ Because it is completely encased in dough, McDonald’s apple pie can be munched like a sandwich.

McDonald’s continues to experiment with new menu items. One that has been successful is the snack wrap.⁴⁶ This is a classic McDonaldized food. For one thing, it is another form of “finger food” that customers can eat quickly and efficiently. For another, it uses ingredients already in McDonald’s restaurants and used in other menu items—breaded chicken strips, flour tortilla, shredded lettuce and cheese, and ranch sauce.

The limited number of menu choices also contributes to customer efficiency in fast-food restaurants. McDonald’s does not serve egg rolls, and Taco Bell does not offer fried chicken. Advertisements like “We do it your way” and “Your way, right away” imply that fast-food chains happily accommodate special requests. But plying the consumer who has a special request in a fast-food restaurant. Because much of these stores’ efficiency stems from the fact that they virtually always do it one way—their way—the last thing fast-food restaurants want is to do it your way. Customers with the temerity to ask for a well-done burger or well-browned fries are likely to cool their heels for a long time waiting for such “exotica.” Few customers are willing to wait because after all, it undermines the main advantages of going to a fast-food restaurant. The idea behind what Henry Ford said long ago about cars has been extended to hamburgers: “Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black.”⁴⁷

Many food products other than fast food have been simplified in the name of efficiency. Energy drinks such as 5-hour ENERGY and Red Bull are basically simplified beverages designed to quickly deliver large amounts of caffeine. Soylent (based on the 1973 sci-fi movie *Soylent Green* in which corpses are converted into edible waters to deal with the shortage of food) is an experimental powder designed to be transformed into a drink that provides all the nutrients needed by the human body. A journalist who consumed the drink for most of his meals over a period of a week and a half found it to be “punishingly boring, joyless . . . everything about Soy lent screams function, not fun. It may offer complete nourishment, but only at the expense of the aesthetic and emotional pleasures many of us crave in food.”⁴⁸

Simplified products and services are increasingly on offer in many other settings. AAMCO Transmissions works mainly on transmissions, and Midstate Muffler largely restricts itself to the installation of mufflers. H&R Block does millions of simple tax returns in its nearly 13,000 offices, many of which are overseas. Because it uses many part-time and seasonal employees and does not offer the full array of tax and financial services available from a certified public accountant (CPA), it is undoubtedly not the best place to have complicated tax

returns completed.⁴⁹ "McDentists" may be relied on for simple dental procedures, but patients would be ill advised to have root canal work done by one. Pearle Vision centers offer eye examinations, but clients should go to an eye doctor for any major vision problem. USA TODAY offers readers highly simplified "News McNuggets."

Putting Customers to Work

A final mechanism for increasing efficiency in a McDonaldized world is to put customers to work. Consumers who also produce (work) can be seen as engaging in the process of presumption.⁵⁰ As mentioned earlier, *presumption* comprises the interrelated processes of production and consumption. McDonald's customers, and those in many other settings, are one type of "prosumer"; they are "working consumers."⁵¹ More specifically, they engage in unpaid "self-service work."⁵²

Fast-food customers perform many more unpaid tasks than those who dine at full-service restaurants: "McDonald's came up with the slogan 'We do it all for you.' In reality, at McDonald's, we [the customers] do it all for them. We stand in line, take the food to the table, dispose of the waste, and stack our trays. As labor costs rise and technology develops, the consumer often does more and more of the work."⁵³ The customers who use the drive-through window can also be seen as doing the work involved in disposing of the garbage associated with their meal. While it is efficient for the fast-food restaurant to have consumers wait in line or dispose of their own waste, doing so is inefficient for consumers. Is it more efficient to order your own food rather than having a waiter do it for you? Or to bus your own paper, plastic, and Styrofoam rather than having a bus person do it? Or to figure out what to do with those things once a meal devoured in the car is finished?

The tendency to put customers to work was underscored by Steak 'n Shake's (over 500 restaurants in 27 states in the United States⁵⁴) TV advertisements describing fast-food restaurants as "workaurants."⁵⁵ In contrast, Steak 'n Shake emphasizes its use of china plates and the fact that the food is actually served by a wait staff. Nevertheless, virtually all fast-food restaurants today can be thought of as workaurants.

The salad bar is a classic example of putting the consumer to work. The customer "buys" an empty plate and then loads up on the array of vegetables and other foods available that day. Quickly seeing the merit in this system, many supermarkets installed their own, more elaborate salad bars. The salad lover can thus work as a salad chef at lunch hour in the fast-food restaurant and then do it all over again in the evening at the supermarket. The fast-food restaurant and the supermarket achieve huge gains in efficiency because they need only a small number of employees to keep the various compartments well stocked.

There is an all-you-can-eat restaurant chain, Souplantation (called Sweet Tomatoes in most areas), with 128 outlets in 15 states in the United States. Its main attraction is a lengthy salad bar (really a kind of assembly line) that customers encounter as they enter the restaurant. At lunch and dinner times there are often long lines on both sides of the salad bar. In fact, at particularly busy times, the lines snake out the door and into the parking lot. As diners move slowly along the salad bar, they fill their plates with the desired food. At the end of the salad bar are two cash registers where those in each line pay for their food. Various other foods and desserts are available at counters in the restaurant, and after they have finished their salads, customers trek to the sometimes over and over again.⁵⁷

In a number of fast-food restaurants, including Fuddruggers (over 180 franchises)⁵⁸ and Roy Rogers,⁵⁹ consumers are expected to take a naked burger the "Fixin's Bar" to add lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and so on. The customer thus end up logging a few minutes a week as sandwich makers. At Burger King and most other fast-food franchises, people must fill their own cups with ice and soft drinks, thereby spending a few moments as "soda jerks." Similar customers serve themselves in the popular breakfast buffets at Shoney's or the lunch buffets at Pizza Hut.

As pointed out earlier, McDonald's is testing self-ordering kiosks in some restaurants that allow customers to use a touch screen to place their food orders. They do what counter people at McDonald's currently do—find a touch the picture on the screen that matches the food being ordered.⁶⁰ Also note is the trend toward self-ordering food kiosks at gas station travel plazas such as Sheetz and Wawa. One company that makes these kiosks for a variety of restaurants at airports, drive-throughs, and casinos is Nextep. claims that these systems outperform humans by displaying attractive pictures of food and offering extras to entice the customer to purchase more food.⁶¹

Shopping also offers many examples of imposing work on the consumer. The old-time grocery store, where the clerk retrieved the needed item has been replaced by the supermarket, where a shopper may put in several hours a week "working" as a grocery clerk, seeking out wanted (and unwanted) items during lengthy treks down seemingly endless aisles. Having obtained the groceries, the shopper then unloads the food at the checkout counter and, some cases, even bags the groceries.

Of course, some supermarket checkout stands now ask the customer to do the scanning, thereby eliminating the need for a checkout clerk.⁶² Such self-checkout terminals are increasing rapidly in the United States throughout the world, and the number has multiplied greatly in recent years. The systems that allow customers to pay with credit cards eliminate the need for cashiers. The developer of one scanning system predicted that soon "self-service grocery technology could be as pervasive as the automatic car

machines used by bank customers.⁶⁴ One customer, apparently a strong believer in McDonaldization, said of such a system, "It's quick, easy and efficient. . . . You get in and out in a hurry."⁶⁵ But as an official with a union representing supermarket clerks put it, "To say it's more convenient for the customer is turning the world upside down. . . . In general, making customers do the work for themselves is not customer service."⁶⁶ In IKEA, customers do many of the things described above, but (as pointed out in Chapter 1) they also sometimes put together their own purchases (e.g., the Billy bookcase).

Virtually gone are gas station attendants who fill gas tanks, check the oil, and clean windows; drivers now put in a few minutes a week as unpaid attendants. Although one might think that eliminating the gas station attendant leads to lower gasoline prices (and indeed it does in the short run), a comparison of gas prices at stations with and without attendants shows little difference in price. In the end, the gasoline companies and service station owners simply found another way to force the consumer to do the work employees once had to be paid to perform.

In some doctors' offices, patients must now weigh themselves and take their own temperatures. More important, patients have been put to work in the medical world through the use of an increasingly wide array of do-it-yourself medical tests. Two basic types are available: monitoring instruments and diagnostic devices.⁶⁷ Monitoring devices include blood pressure monitors and glucose and cholesterol meters, as well as at-home kits marketed to parents to allow them to test their children for marijuana, heroin, and so on. Among the diagnostic tests are pregnancy detectors, ovulation predictors, HIV test kits, and fecal occult blood detectors. Thus, patients are now being asked to familiarize themselves with technologies that were formerly the exclusive province of physicians, nurses, or trained technicians. In addition, patients are being asked to provide samples of bodily fluids (blood, urine) or by-products (fecal matter) that were once handled (very carefully) by professional medical people. But in an era of high medical costs, it is cheaper and more efficient (no unnecessary trips to the doctor's office or to the lab) for patients to monitor and test themselves. Such home testing may identify problems that otherwise might not be discovered, but it can also lead to unnecessary worry, especially in the case of "false-positive" results. In either case, many of us are now "working," at least part-time, as unpaid medical technicians.

The automated teller machine (ATM) in the banking industry allows (forces) consumers to work, for at least a few moments, as unpaid bank tellers (and often pay fees for the privilege). To encourage the use of ATMs, some banks have begun charging a fee for using human tellers.⁶⁸

When a receiver fails, DISH mails its customers a new one as a replacement. The customer is expected to return the defective one in the same box that contained the new one. More important, it is up to the consumer to install the new receiver. There is, of course, help available by phone if necessary—and it is

necessary! DISH will send someone to install the new receiver, but the delay involved and the relatively high cost discourage most customers from taking this option.

When calling many businesses these days, instead of dealing with a human operator, consumers must push a bewildering sequence of numbers and codes before they get, they hope, the desired extension.⁶⁹ Here is the way one human describes such a "conversation" and the work involved for the caller:

"The party you are trying to reach—Thomas Watson—is unavailable at this time. To leave a message, please wait for the beep. To review your message, press 7. To change your message after reviewing it, press 4. To add to your message, press 5. To reach another party, press the star sign and enter the four-digit extension. To listen to Muzak, press 23. To transfer out of phone mail in what I promise you will be a futile effort to reach a human, press 0—because we treat you like one."⁷⁰

Instead of being interviewed by the government census taker, people usually receive a questionnaire (one that is supposedly self-explanatory) in the mail (fill out on their own. The self-response rate for occupied housing units was 74% in the 2010 census.⁷¹ Census takers were used about a quarter of the time to obtain the information, and even then they were deployed only after residents failed to respond to the mailed questionnaire.⁷²

The ubiquity of all of these seemingly trivial activities means that the modern consumer spends an increasingly significant amount of time and energy doing unpaid labor. Although organizations are realizing greater efficiencies, customers are often sacrificing convenience and efficiency.

Calculability: Big Macs and Little Chips

McDonaldization also involves calculability: calculating, counting, and quantifying many different things. Quantity tends to become a surrogate for quality. Numerical standards are set for both processes (production, for example) and end results (goods, for example). In terms of processes, the emphasis is on speed (usually high), whereas for end results, the focus is on the number of products produced and served or on their size (usually large).

This calculability has a number of positive consequences, the most important being the ability to produce and obtain large amounts of things very rapidly. Customers in fast-food restaurants get a lot of food quickly; managers and owners get a great deal of work from their employees, and the work is done speedily. However, the emphasis on quantity tends to affect adversely the quality of both the process and the result. For customers, calculability often means eating on the run (hardly a "quality" dining experience) and consuming, for

that is almost always mediocre. For employees, calculability often means obtaining little or no personal meaning from their work; therefore, the work, products, and services suffer.

Calculability is intertwined with the other dimensions of McDonaldization. For instance, calculability makes it easier to determine efficiency; that is, those steps that take the least time are usually considered the most efficient. Once quantified, products and processes become more predictable because the same amounts of materials or time are used from one place or time period to another. Quantification is also linked to control, particularly to the creation of nonhuman technologies that perform tasks in a given amount of time or make products of a given weight or size. Calculability is clearly linked to irrationality since, among other things, the emphasis on quantity tends to affect quality adversely.

Crucial to any discussion of calculability in contemporary society is the impact of the computer.⁷⁴ The proliferation of personal computers allows more of us to do more calculations with increasing speed. Many aspects of today's quantity-oriented society could not exist, or would need to be greatly modified, were it not for the modern computer. Although society undoubtedly was already moving toward increased calculability before computer technology advanced to its current level, computers have greatly expedited and extended that tendency.

Emphasizing Quantity Rather Than Quality of Products

McDonald's has always emphasized bigness; it and the other fast-food chains have a "bigger-is-better mentality."⁷⁵ For a long time, the most visible symbols of this emphasis were the large signs, usually beneath the even larger golden arches, touting the millions and, later, billions of hamburgers sold by McDonald's. This was a rather heavy-handed way of letting everyone know about McDonald's great success. (With the wide-scale recognition of their success in recent years, there is less need for McDonald's to be so obvious—hence the decline of such signs and the decrease in the size of the golden arches. Public protests against the size of the golden arches have also played a role in this.⁷⁶) The mounting number of hamburgers sold not only indicated to potential customers that the chain was successful but also fostered the notion that the high quality of the burgers accounted for the immense sales. Hence, quantity appeared to equal quality.

The Fast-Food Industry: Of "Big Bites" and "Super Big Gulps"

The emphasis on quantity is abundantly clear in the names of McDonald's offerings. The best-known example is the Big Mac. A large burger is considered desirable simply because consumers thus receive a large serving. Furthermore,

consumers are led to believe that they are getting a great deal of food for a small price. Calculating consumers come away with the feeling that they are getting a good deal—and maybe even getting the best of McDonald's.

Many other fast-food restaurants mirror the emphasis by McDonald's or quantity. Burger King points out the quantity of meat in the "Big King," as well as the "Whopper," the "Double Whopper," and even the "Triple Whopper" (Burger King's fish sandwich is "Big Fish.") Not to be outdone, Jack in the Box has its "Jumbo Jack with Cheese," Hardee's offers a "Monster Thickburger" (two thirds of a pound), KFC has "Value Boxes" and "Double Down" (no bun but two pieces of fried chicken, two pieces of bacon, and two pieces of cheese) and Taco Bell offers the "Big Box."⁷⁷ Similarly, 7-Eleven proffers its customers a large soft drink called the "Big Gulp" and the even larger "Double Gulp." It also offers a "Big Bite" hot dog.

Burger King also offers BK Stackers. The idea is that people can supersize their hamburger sandwich to include up to *three* (!) hamburger patties, two cheese slices, and three half-slices of bacon. In one advertisement, the foreman at the "BK Stacker factory" is shown yelling "more meat" to workers struggling to produce a bigger burger. Of the product, Burger King says, "It's the flame-broiled meat lover's burger, and it's here to stay—no veggies allowed."⁷⁸ A meat lover who maximizes the Stacker will consume about 650 calories (the Triple Whopper has 1,140 calories), 1,020 milligrams of sodium (the Triple Whopper has a bit more), and about half of a day's allowance of saturated fat. Not to be outdone, Carl's Jr. has several varieties of its highly successful "Six Dollar Burger" (Hardee's has a "Six Dollar Thickburger"), although the "Double Six Dollar Burger," with about 75% of a day's suggested intake of calories (what does one do about eating for the rest of the day?), apparently went too far and was dropped.

Then there is Denny's well-known "Grand Slam" breakfasts. The emphasis is on not only the size of the meal but its low price. This is clear in one commercial in which a man proclaims, "I'm going to eat too much, but I'm never going to pay too much."⁷⁹ Of course, he and other consumers of Grand Slam breakfasts are likely to "pay" in the long run (with their health) since it has many calories and large amounts of fat and sodium.

For years, McDonald's offered a "Super-Size" order of fries, 20% larger than a large order, and customers were urged to supersize their meals.⁸⁰ However, the uproar over Morgan Spurlock's documentary, *Super Size Me*, led McDonald's to drop the term, although it continues to offer menu items that emphasize large size ("Daily Double"). Nevertheless, McDonald's continues to lag behind Hardee's and Carl's Jr., which are already offering half-pound burgers.⁸¹

Interestingly, the controversy over large sizes led some fast-food restaurants to offer smaller portions of some menu items, although the emphasis is still on size rather than quality. Examples include Burger King's BK Burger Shots and

Jack in the Box's "Je Racon Cheeseburger." In this context, it is hard to know what to make of Hardee's "Little Thick Cheeseburger"—it is both little and big!

All this emphasis on quantity suggests that fast-food restaurants have little interest in communicating anything directly about quality to their customers.⁸² Were they interested, they might give their products names such as "McTasty," "McDelicious," or "McPrime." But the fact is that typical McDonald's customers know they are not getting the highest-quality food: "No one . . . knows exactly what's in those hamburger patties. . . . Let's face it. Nobody thinks about what's between the bun at McDonald's. You buy, you eat, you toss the trash, and you're out of there like the Lone Ranger."⁸³

Another observer has argued that customers go to McDonald's not for a delicious, pleasurable meal but, rather, to "refuel."⁸⁴ McDonald's is a place to fill our stomachs with lots of calories and carbohydrates so that we can move on to the next rationally organized activity. Eating to refuel is far more efficient than eating to enjoy a culinary experience.

The propensity for fast-food restaurants to minimize quality is well reflected in the sad history of Colonel Harland Sanders, the founder of KFC. The quality of his cooking techniques and his secret seasoning (which his wife originally mixed, packed, and shipped herself) led to a string of about 400 franchised outlets by 1960. Sanders had a great commitment to quality, especially to his gravy: "To Sanders himself the supreme stuff of his art was his gravy, the blend of herbs and spices that time and patience had taught him. It was his ambition to make a gravy so good that people would simply eat the gravy and throw away the durned chicken."⁸⁵

After Sanders sold his business in 1964, he became little more than the spokesman and symbol for KFC. The new owners soon made clear their commitment to speed rather than quality: "The Colonel's gravy was fantastic, they agreed . . . but it was too complex, too time-consuming, too expensive. It had to be changed. It wasn't fast food." Ray Kroc, who befriended Colonel Sanders, recalls him saying, "That friggin' outfit . . . they prostituted every goddamn thing I had. I had the greatest gravy in the world and those sons of bitches they dragged it out and extended it and watered it down that I'm so goddamn mad."⁸⁶

At best, what customers expect from a fast-food restaurant is modest but strong-tasting food—hence, the salty/sweet French fries, highly seasoned sauces, and saccharine shakes. Given such modest expectations of quality, customers do, however, have greater expectations of quantity. They expect to get a lot of food and to pay relatively little for it (or at least think they are getting a bargain).

Even the more upscale McDonaldized restaurant chains are noted for the size of their portions and the mediocrity of their food. Of the Olive Garden, one reviewer said, "But what brings customers in droves to this popular chain

remains a mystery. The food defied mediocrity. Nothing was bad, but nothing was especially good, and it certainly isn't authentically Italian." Of course, the reason is quantity: "Portions . . . are large. . . . So you'll probably end up leaving stuffed, which is not to say satisfied!"⁸⁷

The Cheesecake Factory, begun in Beverly Hills in 1978 and now with nearly 170 restaurants, is another example of an upscale restaurant known for its huge portions (although many devotees consider its food to be higher in quality than, say, Olive Garden). Quantity is also in evidence in the menu, which contains over 200 highly varied items.⁸⁸ The cost of a meal at Cheesecake Factory is considered low for the quantity of food one consumes.

Higher Education: Grades and Scores

In education, most college courses run for a standard number of weeks and hours per week. Little attention is devoted to determining whether a particular subject is best taught in a given number of weeks or hours per week. The focus seems to be on how many students (the consumers) can be herded through the system and what grades they earn rather than the quality of what they have learned and of the educational experience.

A student's entire high school or college experience can be summed up in a single number, the grade point average (GPA). Armed with their GPAs, students can take examinations with quantifiable results, such as the MCAT, LSAT, SAT, and GRE. Colleges, graduate schools, and professional schools can thus focus on three or four numbers in deciding whether or not to admit a student.

For their part, students may choose a university because of its rating. Is it one of the top 10 universities in the country? (Such ratings may become more common since in 2014 President Obama proposed a controversial rating system for all of the 7,000 colleges and universities in the United States.⁸⁹) Is its physics department in the top 10? Are its sports teams usually top ranked? Most important, is it one of the top 10 party schools?

The increasing success of online universities is traceable to various quantitative factors. For one thing, courses are far less expensive than attending four-year residential colleges, and credits can often be transferred to traditional colleges. For example, in one case, a student paid \$750 for seven credits that would have cost \$2,800 at a nearby college. In another, a master's degree in health care management from online Western Governors University cost only \$9,000 rather than the approximately \$40,000 it would cost at a traditional university.⁹⁰ At the online company, StraighterLine, which has had more than a thousand students, it costs \$99 to register for a month, plus \$49 a course. A full "freshman year" would cost slightly more than \$1,000.⁹¹

Potential employers may decide whether to hire graduates on the basis of their scores, their class ranking, and the ranking of the university from which

they graduated. To increase their job prospects, students may set a number of different degrees and credentials with the hope that employers will believe that the longer the list of degrees, the higher the job candidate. Personal letters of reference, however important, are replaced by standardized forms with quantified ratings (for example, "ranks 5th in a class of 25").

The number of credentials a person possesses plays a role in securing a job. For example, people in various occupations list their initials after their names to convince prospective clients of their competence. (My BA, MBA, and PhD are supposed to persuade the client to write this book, although a degree in "hamburgerology" is more relevant.) Said one insurance appraiser with ASA, FSA, FEA, and CRE after his name, "The more [initials] you tend to put after your name, the more impressed they [potential clients] become."⁹²

The sheer number of credentials, however, tells little about the person sporting them. Furthermore, this emphasis on quantifying credentials has led people to make creative use of letters after their names. For example, one camp director put "ABD" after his name to impress prospective campers. As all academics know, this informal (and unimpressive) label stands for "all but dissertation" and is the label for people who have not completed their graduate courses and exams but who have no dissertations. Also noteworthy here is the development of organic credentials. The sole reason for existence is to supply meaningless credentials, such as the mail.