
Back-Road Basics

The foolish seek happiness in the distance; the wise grow
it under their feet.

—JAMES OPPENHEIM
American poet

Sometimes, people feel as if they're being naughty when they use a Shortcut. Some of the food for the best dinner parties I've hosted came straight out of plastic containers from Whole Foods—although I can take credit for spending the time to make the selections from behind the deli counter! Of course, I later emptied the delectable contents into my own serving dishes and tossed the evidence of its source into the trash outside. I used to feel guilty when I did this—because I *can* cook—until at one such party, I confessed when everyone began cooing about how great the food was. Afterward, one of the gourmet cooks in the group admitted she does the same thing more times than not, then adds a touch of this and that to the store-bought dishes, to make them “her own.” Since that incident, I have lost all humility about using this Shortcut.

As with most Shortcuts, it doesn't make any sense to take the long road unless the Shortcut is unethical, illegal, or leads to shoddy work. The kind of Shortcut with a capital “S” is what we're talking about here; and not only is it a good thing, it's the way to thrive and survive in this incredibly busy and demanding world. Look around you and you will see that the winners in financial, personal, and spiritual endeavors—to name a few—all use excellent Shortcuts. They use Shortcuts so they can become Shortcuts themselves. Everyone intuitively wants in on the Shortcut action because we all know in our gut that that's how the world works.

Physical Shortcuts, or landmarks as most of us know them, are a powerful way to think of “people” Shortcuts. I’ve lived in Denver nearly all of my life. There’s nothing like knowing a city inside and out, especially when severe weather is breaking loose and I’m stuck in rush-hour traffic. While all the out-of-state transplants are complaining about being trapped on a highway that looks like a parking lot, I can get from one end of the sprawling Denver metro area to the other by taking a series of back roads, and be home watching them on the news still stuck in the same place as when I took my detour. Mathematicians tell us that the shortest distance between two places is a straight line; it’s also touted as the distance a crow flies. Well, I’m neither a mathematician nor a crow, and I’m more interested in time than distance. So, while I might travel 10 extra miles to get home on a route that isn’t published in any GPS system, I’ll get there more quickly because I know the Shortcuts. Shortcuts are for people who are interested in getting where they need to be in a more effective and efficient manner. It’s not about doing so with bad quality, however. People often imply that taking a Shortcut means taking the easy, lesser-quality route. Yes, there are those kinds of shortcuts; but the purpose of this book is to focus on the kind that make us all do the “I could have had a V-8” slap on our foreheads because we didn’t know about it sooner or think of it ourselves. You would be unlikely to hear a reasonable person who is stuck in traffic say, “No, I’m going to stay right here in this traffic for the next two hours to travel 10 miles because it’s the main road, the quality road to take.” They would take a Shortcut; and if one were miraculously delivered on that highway, I’d go out on an icy limb to say that they would gladly, gleefully, and joyfully give up some cash if that was required to get it. Shortcuts do that to a person; they feel like a rescuer to us—one worth paying for.

We are all so overwhelmed with the choices available to us today that we are actually becoming paralyzed in our ability to choose from among them. Shortcuts—the human variety—help others to wade through all of the options available, and they are

paid handsomely for this service. They come in the form of realtors, designers, building contractors, wedding consultants, meeting planners, executive coaches, lawyers, janitors . . . and the list goes on. We all want to make the best choice, and Shortcuts have taken the time to learn all about the choices so they can make recommendations to you based on your particular need.

Research psychologist Dr. Barry Schwarz is focused on the interesting topic of choice. His book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why Less is More*¹ delves deeply into why an abundance of choice is not necessarily good. He points out a very simple experiment performed in a grocery store: when there are several choices of fruit jam to sample, a person is a lot less likely to purchase a jar than when there are only a few to sample. That's right, fewer choices lead to a decision being made, whereas more choices cause people to often give up. It's paralysis by analysis. Schwarz also points out that an excess of choice often brings higher degrees of depression and self-doubt. He asserts that the more apt we are to examine all of the choices available, the worse we actually feel. We might become paralyzed at the amount of choice offered to us. Whether we're contemplating a grocery store shelf or a major business decision, we all need Shortcuts to help us wade through the variety of information and options now available to us.

Several years ago, personal shoppers came onto the scene. Yes, there are people who will do your grocery shopping for you. Personal shoppers will do everything from buying exactly the item and the brand on your list to getting general staples that you specify; but they make the choice about brand according to cost. That same kind of concierge service is cropping up in corporations everywhere. You can buy theater tickets, get your car serviced, order that birthday gift you forgot to buy, even get a massage.

Think of your own Shortcuts at work. If you've been around since the time when baby pictures were only in black and white, you might remember when sandwiches came out of a vending machine in little plastic, triangle-shaped packages. You did all of

your errands before or after work, on weekends, and sometimes during your lunch break. When you went to the grocery store and you couldn't remember what your kids wanted, you had to wait to get to the store and find a pay phone to call home. If, when you called, you got a busy signal (this is the days before call-waiting), you had to call back later. Life was linear. It was one thing after the next, after the next, after the next. There was very little, if any, of this go to the dry cleaners, talk with a client on the phone on the way there while you're being e-mailed a contract, all the while scarfing down frozen yogurt or a quick burger kind of multitasking.

Shortcut Lesson

The irony of technology is that it has made things easier to accomplish at the same time it has made things more complex. We can now do more things more rapidly, but because more is now expected of us all the time, those technological wonders that make life easier actually make it more complex, as well. Thus, we now need to use Shortcuts because they are valuable to our well-being and success. Using products and services as Shortcuts is not a cop-out. We human Shortcuts are necessary, too, so that we can find sanity and time in life. The goal is to find an excellent set of Shortcuts. Great Shortcuts don't require you to give up quality, but they might require you to give up some money. The better and more necessary the Shortcut, the more cash you are usually willing to give. The same value and payment equation applies to you when you become a Shortcut. Round and round we go. Elton John and Tim Rice had it right. It's the "circle of life."