

TO SWITCH OR
NOT TO SWITCH?

Andy Griffiths

Sample pages

LIFE is full of challenges. Even a seemingly simple act, such as choosing which lane to stand in at the supermarket, can be fraught with difficulties. For instance, consider the following situation:

You are in a supermarket, and you have nine items in your basket. One of the items is a packet of condoms. It is the only item you really want—you only put the others in the basket to disguise the fact that you are buying condoms. Not that there's anything wrong with buying condoms—they make great heavy-duty water-bombs—but it's possible that people might mistakenly think you want them for something else.

***DILEMMA #1:** You are about to take your place in the express lane, but then you notice that it is only for shoppers with eight items or less. Should you try to sneak through and hope that nobody is counting, or should you go and join the regular queue?*

It's a tough decision. One item over the eight-item limit is hardly going to make a big difference to the speed at which you pass through the checkout. And yet the lane is clearly marked '8 items or less'. Can you be arrested for trying to smuggle more than the allowable number of items through an express lane? Of course not. You decide to go for it. But then you look at the other people in the lane. They are all doing the right thing. They all have eight items or less in their baskets. It's not really very fair to them. And deep down you are not a bad person. You decide to go through a regular checkout.

***DILEMMA #2:** Is it better to stand behind one person who has a trolley stuffed full of items, or to stand in a queue of three or four people who only have a small basket of items each?*

This is like one of those trick questions in a maths test. You want to pick the obvious answer, but you know that the obvious answer will be wrong, so you pick the other one. Which turns out to be wrong, because that's just what the person who wrote the test wanted you to do. Give up! It doesn't matter which queue you pick. The other queue will always move faster. It's the law of supermarket queues. So, after a quick game of eenie-meenie-minie-moh, you take your place behind the person with the full trolley.

***DILEMMA #3:** Nothing happens. The other queue is moving, but not yours. Or are you just imagining it? Is it just one of those 'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' situations? Do you stick with your original hunch and stay in the lane you're in or do you cut your losses and change queues? To switch or not to switch?—that is the question.*

You're watching the people in the other checkout. They're practically sprinting—just hurling their stuff and their money at the cashier—who in turn is just throwing them the bags and their change as they're running out the door. Meanwhile you're stuck in the same spot reading and rereading the headlines on the latest *Woman's Day*. Royal blah this ... royal blah that ... You can't stand it any more. You don't give a royal raspberry about the royals. All you want is to be outside in the sun chucking water-bombs at your friends. You switch lanes.

***DILEMMA #4:** But now the queue you were in starts moving, and the queue you've just joined stops. The cashier is waiting for a price check on Bavarian Cheese Cake and, of course nobody has any idea of the price, least of all the old guy who's trying to buy it.*

Bavarian cheese cake? What does he need a *Bavarian* cheese cake for? Why not a regular cheese cake? For that matter, why any cheese cake at all? Why can't he eat something healthy? Something that comes in a box with a clearly printed barcode?

And then it becomes clear. The old guy doesn't actually *want* a Bavarian cheese cake. He's only buying it to annoy *you*. He's the same old guy who is always shuffling in front of you in the mall. The same old guy who always manages to get to the ATM just before you do ... It's hard to believe, but this old guy has nothing better to do than to devote his entire life to driving you insane.

DILEMMA #5: *Should you give in to the powerful urge to grab the back of the old guy's head and push his face repeatedly into the Bavarian cheese cake while screaming 'Next time get one with the price on it Grandpa!' ... or should you resist this impulse in case it attracts attention to you and your condoms?*

You take a deep breath. You count to ten. You resist. You take another deep breath ... and just when you're feeling calm, you notice that there is a sign hanging from the register 'CASHIER IN TRAINING'.

DILEMMA #6: *You know you should switch aisles immediately because these cashiers-in-training are the slowest of all possible cashiers—but you're worried that if they see you leave it might hurt their feelings. They might break down and start crying. And the supermarket manager will come over and ask: 'Who upset this cashier?' and everybody in the entire supermarket will turn around and point to you, and they'll say in unison, 'That person there! The one with the condoms in the shopping basket!'*

So you don't switch. Everybody's got to learn some time. You hang in there, giving little encouraging smiles to the nervous cashier, trying not to let them see how close you are to breaking open the packet of condoms and going berserk with water-bombs. *Royal blah this ... Royal blah that ... aaagghhhh!*

DILEMMA #7: *They announce that they're opening the lane next to the one you're in. You think, yes! It's the perfect excuse I need to get*

away from the cashier-in-training. But the woman in front of you has been there longer. Should you give her the chance to move there first?

You don't want to appear really selfish by dashing across and cutting her out, so you pause for a moment to give her the option. But she doesn't move—probably too busy reading about the royals—and in the meantime five other people dash over and you've lost your chance. And now the old guy with the Bavarian cheese cake has forgotten his PIN number. By the time he's punched every possible configuration of numbers on the key-pad the five people in the recently opened aisle are through and you're only just unloading your basket onto the conveyor belt.

***DILEMMA #8:** It's your turn. The cashier smiles and says 'Hello, how are you?' You pause. Is it a good idea to say, 'Well, not too bad considering that I've just spent the last three and a half thousand years stuck in a queue thanks to the fact that you are the crappiest cashier-in-training in whose lane I've ever had the misfortune to be stuck,' or should you just keep quiet and not antagonise them in any way in case they retaliate by calling for a price check on your condoms just to embarrass you in front of the whole supermarket?*

You decide to play it safe. You smile. You're very polite. You're doing really well, too, until the cashier says, 'Is this all you've got? You should have gone through the express lane'.