

On the Calibration of Microwaves

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Not All Microwaves Are Created Equal

Isn't that the truth? I get used to the one we have at home. But then I go to my parents. Totally different. Go to my in-laws. Totally different. Bring leftovers to work. Totally different.

My in-law's can barely boil water (takes roughly 10 minutes), the one I have at home can nuke a plate - **AFTER** it's turned the food into a lump of charcoal (all that **UNDER** 10 minutes).

Feeling It Out

Like I said, though: I got used to the one I have at home. At this point in our relationship, I can tell exactly what time and power level to cook a hotdog (or 3 or 5 or 8) to heat it through so it's not cold 4 minutes later. I can take a variety of leftovers and usually on the 2nd try, get them just to my wife's taste (or heat preference). I can do the same for the babies. You see, I've used our home microwave enough to get a feel for it. I know that microwave, like I know the back of my hand. After boiling out cups of water, roasting plates to a charred crisp and not-quite thawing hamburger, I've finally gotten the feel for it.

Try Again

Then I decided to take leftovers to work. That was a frustration and a disaster. First try took 3 attempts and it still wasn't quite right. The entire learning curve had to be started all over again. But, again, given enough practice and time, I've gotten the hang of how to reheat a cup of hot tea, make 2 or 3 frozen burritos (with melted cheese), or warmup a McDonald's apple pie in it with no problem.

Inlaws & Outlaws

So, now I have 2 microwaves figured out. I can make an acceptable burrito at home or at work. Then I go to my parents - they have a similar model to one of our previous microwaves. So, I have

this vague notion in the back of my mind that I should be able to figure this out in short order - it's like riding a bike, right? Nope. Boiled out half a mug of water (hot chocolate). Vegetables remain still mostly frozen on the first go. Dang.

Then my in-laws upgrade their microwave. It's not up to the Cadillac that we have (very blessed), but it's somewhere between the work microwave (now the weakest) and my parents microwave.

There is simply no chance that I'm going to get a burrito to cook right first try.

Even though they have guides, fancy buttons, and helper functions. Microwaves are "feel technology". Once you become acclimated to one, you can "feel" what time and temp to set it on to do normal tasks (which is burritos and apple pies for me). All those fancy buttons and helper functions are simply mediocre guides to guests. We still get it wrong - they don't really matter. Every try to get a bag of popcorn perfectly popped with a popcorn button? It's probably never happened in the brief history of the microwave. They all get close, but as the saying goes: no cigar.

Microwaves on Wheels

If you think about it, a lot of technology lives in this "feel" paradigm. That's why we all have that car we remember loving. Like microwaves on wheels, they all start as awkwardly foreign objects that have guides, fancy buttons, and helper functions. But in the end, we learn to feel ours out until we can operate it with our eyes closed (not recommended - absolute safety hazard, if you want to test this theory, try it on the microwave - **never** the car). This is basically what your friend does. You know, the one that can eat a burger, talk on the phone, and change lanes on rush hour traffic - all with a stick shift!

Tactile Technology

In the end, I think more technology falls under this tactile familiarity than we think. We tend to "feel" through things rather than see or think through them. That's why when we use other people's stuff it's so... awkward. And we can use our versions of the same things like we're techno gurus, Geek Squad® ninjas, or microwave masters. Ultimately, everything is either my home microwave or my inlaws. And that burrito is either cooked to perfection or partially frozen.

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