



Services cater to our speeded-up lives



By [Marco R. della Cava](#), USA TODAY

If you're reading these words, the chocolates and flowers are on their way. Because given the gazillion draws of modern life — the cellphone, the BlackBerry, the boss, the kids, the TiVo, the dog — it's a small miracle this sentence has made it into your day.

Our fast society is only getting faster, putting inordinate demands on our time and prompting the people and companies that service our lives to come up with ways to help us reclaim some of it.

Don't have time to read all those magazines you subscribe to?

Not a problem. A new website called Brijit offers one-paragraph summaries of even the most complex and deeply researched tomes. "It's like drinking from a fire hose these days," says founder Jeremy Brosowsky. "There's more good stuff than ever, but the problem is consuming it day to day."

Is playing Monopoly akin to sitting through an endless symphony?

Monopoly Express now gets you and your top hat on and off Boardwalk in 20 minutes (Scrabble Express and Sorry! Express offer similar speedy promises). "People just have a lot more options for what to do with their time now," says Rob Daviau, Hasbro senior game designer. "People still love board games, but TV, the Web, soccer games all cut in."

Speed dating too slow? Speed Date.com dispatches with the in-person part of the encounter and sets strangers up for three-minute rounds of e-mailing or instant messaging. "We found that people think filling out long forms for most dating sites is too time-consuming," says co-founder Dan Abelon. "Our goal is to get people together, but even faster than before."

The sense that time is speeding up isn't new. Surely that's what folks said when the automobile displaced the horse. Or, for that matter, when the wheel showed up.

It's a sentiment often celebrated in song. "And you run and you run to catch up with the sun, but it's sinking, racing around to come up behind you again," David Gilmour sings on Pink Floyd's *Time*. That was recorded in 1973.

"There's never been a time in history when people didn't think things were going faster than ever before," says James Gleick, author of *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*. Since the book appeared in 1999, "things have gotten even worse, and I sense that we've got to hit a wall soon."

Though Gleick is loath to moralize on the topic ("No one should tell you to slow down"), he says certain endeavors — whether

recovering from an injury or savoring the slow beauty "of a pitcher scuffing the dirt on his mound" — will not hold up to the crushing weight of acceleration.

"Speed is fun, but it also doesn't necessarily make things better," says Gleick, who is working on a book about the history of information, which he says is not going quickly. "If we can hold those two notions side by side, we'll be OK."

And if we don't balance what we *can* do with what we *should* do, the results won't be pretty. "The bottleneck in this sped-up system is our minds," says Richard Shiffrin, professor of psychology at Indiana University and an expert on cognitive functions. "The cost of acceleration, if we try and keep up, is that our responses to things move from reflective to reactive. In essence, you're faced then with a choice between doing more things but sloppily, or fewer things well."

Shiffrin has opted for the latter. In fact, reaching him isn't easy given that he's prone to ignoring most voice mails and all but a few urgent e-mails. "There is a lot of analysis out there on the deficits associated with task-switching. The cost is all part of the increased stress of our fast-paced environment."

Of course, voices have been raised in reaction to this sprint through life, typified by the Slow Food movement. But for most of us, opting to savor a multi-hour meal is as likely as dismissing the ATM so we can have a long chat with the bank teller.

Not going to happen.

Technology, as always, takes center stage in the debate over the relative merits of our high-speed lives. Tech is both culprit and savior.

On the one hand, the Internet has made the once-daunting Encyclopedia Britannica seem as simple to navigate as *My First Alphabet*. On the other, the digitization of just about anything has given rise to timesavers such as quicker computer boot-ups, on-demand movies and instant camera-to-computer-monitor photo albums. (Ugh, did we really once wait *days* for film to be processed?)

"Most marketing efforts today focus on simplifying your life and giving you back time," says Peter Sealey, former chief marketing officer of Coca-Cola and now adjunct professor of marketing at Claremont (Calif.) Graduate University. "Most people are screaming, 'Take this burden off me!' So the promise isn't so much about doing something faster, but the implication that you'll have more time to do the things you really want to do."

The promise of saving time is so powerful that it can give rise to magazine ads like this one: "Exercise in exactly four minutes per day." That's the pitch from the folks at fastexercise.com, whose \$14,615 Range of Motion machine looks like a cross between a Rube Goldberg contraption and a bike.

"I'm not sure four minutes would do it, but certainly it's no secret that a 30-minute workout is what everyone's shooting for," says Joe Moore, president of the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, who says the big trend in his industry is offering customers faster workouts.

"People talk a lot about going to the gym, but they often don't have much time for it."

Or for much of anything.

Take Irit Epelbaum. Compared with the laid-back pace of her native Bolivia, her rapid-fire Silicon Valley lifestyle is the stuff of madness. But by our time-crunched standards, she's family.

"I drop off my laundry on the way out the door, I listen to Portuguese language tapes during my commute, I exercise at lunch if I can, and I eat at my desk." No wonder Epelbaum, 28, was intrigued by SpeedDate.com. Though the service didn't yield a boyfriend, it did fit neatly into her schedule.

"The whole world is changing, getting faster, so anything that helps me have a life is welcome," says Epelbaum, who works for MerchantCircle.com, a start-up company that shifts small businesses onto the info superhighway. "It's the life I've chosen. Still, it's nothing like life in New York. When I lived there, everything was for pickup or delivery. No one had any time to get things themselves."

Some of those Big Apple speed demons are customers of Yanik Silver's new company, Maverick Business Adventures.

Once Silver realized that today's adrenaline-amped entrepreneurs have about as much interest in a five-hour round of golf as they do in dialing a rotary phone, he launched an outfit that promises networking opportunities mixed with fun, quick adventures, like sky diving, racing cars or rock climbing.

"Socializing while golfing is so yesteryear," says Silver, whose personal timesaving addictions include TiVo, "which helps me shave 15 minutes off a one-hour show, and gives me back a little time to spend with my two kids."

Funny, but children often seem to be the spark behind today's time-saving creations. For Brijit's Brosowsky, who has four kids under 5, a lack of free time led to his "coffee-table problem," stacked as it was with unopened magazines.

"I just wanted someone to tell me what was good and what wasn't," says Brosowsky, whose site pays reviewers a modest fee to summarize often weighty pieces in magazines such as *The New Yorker*

"We all have so much trouble staying on top of things today. And at the same time, we're all expected to be current. We're now in the era of the human filter, people you trust sorting things for you."

Tim Ferriss thinks most of us have it all wrong, as evidenced by the title of his best-selling book, *The 4-Hour Workweek*.

In a nutshell, this serial entrepreneur is all about concerted bursts of productivity enabled by counterintuitive moves such as hiring online personal assistants from services like AskSunday.com (the logic being that your time is pricier than theirs) and checking e-mail a maximum of twice a day (because you'd be surprised how few e-mails really need instant responses).

Following these bursts are what Ferriss calls "mini-retirements," like the three-week one he's on now in the Uruguayan beach town of Punta del Este.

"Acceleration isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it is when applied to all things," he says via his Skype phone, the sounds of resort life chirping in the background.

"I find that for most people, a sped-up life leads to feelings of guilt and anxiety instead of productivity and relaxation. Unending acceleration isn't scalable, whether as a lifestyle or as a business model."

Ferriss says people too often "confuse being busy with being productive." He lives by an 80/20 principle, which holds that it takes only 20% of our focused efforts to yield 80% of our work. The rest, in essence, is just wasted time. "Figure that one out, and you will get off the hamster wheel," he says.

It's difficult to say whether Ferriss delivering such dictums from a beach retreat just proves his point, or simply makes him an object of enervating jealousy.

But even more maddeningly, trying to figure that one out has wasted more of what we all lack.