

COULD IT BE THAT
WHAT YOU BELIEVE IS
HOLDING YOU BACK?

FALLACIES HOME

By Scott Sedam, Contributing Editor



Among my trusted travel gear is a 7-inch Kindle Fire HD tablet that I use almost exclusively for reading books or articles on airplanes or in hotel rooms. As much as I love the feel of a genuine fat hardcover or even a nice paperback in my hands, the Kindle is typically one-fourth the size and downloads anything I want in the time it takes to write this sentence.

One of the sometimes beneficial yet occasionally annoying features of Kindle ownership is the notices I'm sent by Amazon about what I should read next based on previous purchases. Because I am both a voracious reader and have eclectic taste, Amazon's recommendations for me on any given day may range from architecture to aviation, business to baseball, cooking to construction, physics to philosophy, or from history to humor to housing.

As I was pondering the content for my upcoming proverbial "New Year's Column"—where I try to provoke builders into thinking differently during the coming year—I received one of those notices. My friends at Amazon recommended a book, *76 Fallacies*, by a Michael LaBossiere, who it turns out is a philosophy professor. At first I thought little of it, but then that evening I was whipping up a dish for dinner and found we had no mayonnaise, so I decided to make my own. Just crack an egg into the blender, add the vinegar, then slowly add the oil, and in about 90 seconds you have perfect mayo without preservatives, food starch, or a host of chemicals used to give the stuff the shelf life of bottled water. Yet we all know the source of every picnic poisoning is always the mayo, right? So out came the Kindle to help me

discover the safe way to make mayonnaise at home. Half an hour later, I was still standing there in the kitchen, no progress on the correct recipe, but simply amazed at what I'd read. Turns out, we may have it wrong when it comes to mayonnaise.

COULD YOUR MOTHER BE WRONG?

Well over a decade ago, a food industry trade group put it this way: "For more than 60 years, members of the scientific and regulatory communities have conducted research and published articles that document the safety of commercially prepared mayonnaise. Time and time again, the popular condiment has been exonerated by leading authorities on food safety. Yet, the American public refuses to give up the myth about mayonnaise and food-borne illness." It seems you're more likely to contract food poisoning from the meat and vegetables that go into a dish that has mayonnaise than from the mayo itself.

I could wow you with another 50 fun facts about mayonnaise that would make you a hit at your next office or neighborhood party, but this one's the real killer: Because of the high acid content from vinegar, and the preservatives added to commercial mayo, most harmful bacteria actually stand little chance in mayonnaise. Ridiculous? Our mothers all know better; except our mothers—and everyone else—are wrong. Our presumed knowledge is nothing more than a fallacy.

As I drove to work the next morning, still pondering my newfound understanding of mayonnaise, a message scrolled across the dash of my swell new GMC pickup advising me I had 80 percent of my oil life remaining. I checked the odometer and read 2,007 miles. I did a quick calculation and found that I could actually go more than 10,000 miles before

IN BUILDING

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needing an oil change. What? It took me a long time to get over the old notion of an oil and filter every 3,000 miles, and your friendly local “oil shoppe” will still try to sell you on that presumed cardinal rule. I learned that from my dad who learned it from his dad. I gave in on this one a bit only after reading about tests with fleets of New York City taxis. One group ran to 100,000 miles, changing oil every 3,000 miles; the other group changed at 5,000 miles. There was zero difference in the health of the engines.

Well, 5,000 miles I can buy, but 10,000? So I called the salesman at the dealership to confirm that and he said, “Absolutely, ... just go by what the dash readout tells you.” Just to be sure, I called a different dealer, asked for the service department, and got an identical answer from the service manager there. Again, I confronted the long-held and treasured belief—built from years of personal experience—and I discovered that it was completely false.

THAT'S NOT RIGHT

The next morning, just as I was using some of my homemade mayo, the report broke that government agencies were changing the guidelines and recommendations about fat—in particular, saturated fat. It turns out that most everything we've been told since the 1960s about the dangers of fat in our diet is based on bad science and is pretty much wrong.

The consumption of fat isn't the bugaboo we've been led to believe. It's a fallacy, and I immediately thought back to those eggs as I recalled a similar report, published a few years back, that acknowledged eggs in no way raise your cholesterol after all. More bad science, yet doctors still recommend limiting egg consumption (as well as saturated fat), and restaurants make a nice profit from selling egg-white omelets and such. Everywhere I turned, I was confronting another fallacy, and that Kindle book kept coming to mind. I started to think maybe I should read it.

Then came a phone call from a builder I've known for 15 years. He was ranting about the trade shortage in his city. I couldn't get a word in as he spewed forth about the lack of loyalty among trades and how there is

absolutely no solution in his market, which, of course (just like another 50 U.S. markets), is the single worst market in the nation. After he'd talked himself out, I asked if he would be willing to learn from a builder in a similar market that was statistically even worse off in terms of trade shortages, yet this builder had no trade shortage problems whatsoever. Builder A on the phone immediately assumed that Builder B's solution entailed simply paying trades a lot more for labor. All my efforts to convince Builder A that this wasn't the case—and not only that but to explain how Builder B actually has a substantially higher profit margin than Builder A—had little impact. Builder A then suggested that Builder B's profit margin must be higher due to lower land costs. But Builder A was wrong about that one too, insofar as the raw ground cost. It was true, however, that Builder B's finished lot cost is lower. Surprise! Builder B had better trades on the development side as well.

As the conversation dragged on, it struck me: All of Builder A's laments were based on erroneous beliefs and reasoning—fallacies. As he talked, I began to realize something even more troubling: Builder A had no desire to give up his fallacies. To accept what I told him about Builder B, he had to consider that he may be wrong about several notions he held dear and that there was another way. But giving up those beliefs was more painful to Builder A than dealing with his trade shortage.

I suggested some specific actions that Builder A could take and where he could get outside help if he was truly serious about solving the problem. He thanked me, but I doubt I'll hear from him for another year or two. And he's not much of a reader, so unless one of his folks sticks my column under his nose, I'll not hear from him about that either. I also predict that nothing much will change for his margins in the meantime.

This idea of fallacies was really starting to trouble me, from eggs to oil changes to trade shortages. So I grabbed the Kindle from my briefcase and downloaded LaBossiere's book. Right off, *76 Fallacies* wasn't what I'd expected. I thought I would find 76 examples of

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fallacies from history, politics, religion, science, etc. And yes, LaBossiere does present a host of such examples, some amusing, some aggravating because you can't help but think of examples from your own life. The title, *76 Fallacies*, however, actually refers to 76 different generic types of fallacy—all unique errors in reason and logic. That's right, LaBossiere has identified 76 different ways the human brain can take in information—factual or otherwise—process it, and come up with an erroneous conclusion.

Importantly—and I admit, I don't have this all worked out yet—fallacies aren't merely factual errors but are errors in thinking and reason. It's fairly obvious that you can come up with the wrong conclusion when you have incorrect facts, but you don't often think about coming up with the wrong conclusion when you have the facts right. Yet it happens all the time. LaBossiere goes on in some detail about the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning and how that affects fallacy, and it gets pretty intense, yet his often lighthearted tone makes it manageable.

THE TEXAS SHARPSHOOTER

Just reading through the list of 76 fallacies makes your head spin, and you wonder how many of these incorrect conclusions you've drawn yourself, perhaps as recently as during the past week. I couldn't help but think of all the issues my colleagues and I have dealt with in home building during the past three decades and how many of those problems are simply due to one fallacy or another. Thinking about the trade shortage example above, I went down the list and found at least three specific fallacies that apply:

- **Biased generalization:** This occurs when a conclusion is drawn based on a biased sample.
- **Fallacy of composition:** What is true for parts of the whole, must be true for the entire whole, without adequate justification for the claim.
- **Confusing cause and effect:** The conclusion that one event causes another, simply because the events occur simultaneously (they may have a common cause, or no

relationship at all).

There are no doubt more fallacies we could apply, but that's enough for starters, although I regret that my favorite one on the list, the "Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy," didn't quite fit here. This occurs when someone cherry-picks a small subset of the data. The name is based on the story about a Texan who empties his rifle into the side of a barn, then draws a target centered on the largest concentration of hits, thus claiming himself to be a sharpshooter. You may think this isn't a useful exercise, but I'll challenge you on that. As I thought of Builder A's problem, linking it to a number of LaBossiere's fallacies proved quite helpful in getting me to both understand Builder A's thinking and how I might help him.

If you read *76 Fallacies*, or any other treatise on erroneous and illogical reasoning, you'll quickly find yourself thinking about politics and politicians, as they are such easy targets. You'll also begin to consider all of the fallacies that abound in our industry and the builders you know who suffer under them every day.

I wonder though, for this New Year, if we might all gain by challenging ourselves and our organizations about our own fallacies and how they shape our actions, behaviors, and decisions. I'm working on a list of "10 Biggest Fallacies in Home Building" for the February article, but wouldn't it be a great exercise for your builder team to brainstorm and discuss your own list of fallacies and how you overcome them or fall victim to them? If you do this honestly, you'll challenge your comfort zone—but do you want to be like Builder A who'd rather be comfortable and wrong, or go through some pain and get it right? Leaving some of the worst fallacies behind may even be a genuinely liberating experience and a great way to start a hopeful New Year. **PB**

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