

4. Review the 10 suggestions on the psychology of waiting. Which are the most relevant in (a) a supermarket; (b) a city bus stop on a rainy, dark evening; (c) a doctor's office; and (d) a ticket line for a football game expected to be a sell-out. → 241

The Psychology of Waiting Time

The noted philosopher William James observed, "Boredom results from being attentive to the passage of time itself." When increasing capacity or shifting demand is simply not possible or sufficient, service firms should try to be creative and look for ways to make waiting more palatable for customers. Doctors and dentists stock their waiting rooms with piles of magazines for people to read while waiting. Car repair facilities may have a television for customers to watch. One tire dealer goes even further, providing customers with free popcorn, soft drinks, coffee, and ice cream while they wait for their cars to be serviced.

An experiment at a large bank in Boston found that installing an electronic news display in the lobby led to greater customer satisfaction, but it didn't reduce the perceived time spent waiting for teller service.¹⁴ In some locations, transit operators erect heated shelters equipped with seats to make it less unpleasant for travelers to wait for a bus or train in cold weather. Restaurants solve the waiting problem by inviting dinner guests to have a drink in the bar until their table is ready (that approach makes money for the house as well as keeping the customer occupied). In similar fashion, guests waiting in line for a show at a casino may find themselves queuing in a corridor lined with slot-machines.

The doorman at one Marriott Hotel has taken it upon himself to bring a combination barometer/thermometer to work each day, hanging it on a pillar at the hotel entrance where guests waiting can spend a moment or two examining it while they wait for a taxi or for their car to be delivered from the valet parking.¹⁵ Theme park operators cleverly design their waiting areas to make the wait look shorter than it really is, finding ways to give customers in line the impression of constant progress, and make time seem to pass more quickly by keeping customers amused or diverted while they wait.

Does it help to tell people how long they are likely to have to wait for service? Common sense would suggest that this is useful information for customers, because it allows them to make decisions as to whether they can afford to take the time to wait now or come back later. It also enables them to plan the use of their time while waiting. An experimental study in Canada looked at how students responded to waits while conducting transactions by computer—a situation similar to waiting on hold on the telephone, in that there are no visual clues as to the probable wait time.¹⁶ The study examined dissatisfaction with waits of 5, 10, or 15 minutes under three conditions: (1) the student subjects were told nothing, (2) they were told how long the wait was likely to be, or (3) they were told what their place in line was. The results suggested that for 5-minute waits, it was not necessary to provide information to improve satisfaction. For waits of 10 or 15 minutes, offering information appeared to improve customers' evaluations of service. However, for longer waits, the researchers suggest that it may be more positive to let people know how their place in line is changing rather than letting them know how much time remains before they will be served. One conclusion we might draw is that when the wait is longer, people prefer to see (or sense) that the line is moving, rather than to watch the clock.

Savvy service marketers recognize that customers experience waiting time in different ways, depending on the circumstances. David Maister and other researchers have the following suggestions on how to use the psychology of waiting to make waits less stressful and unpleasant:¹⁷

- *Unoccupied time feels longer than occupied time.* When you are sitting around with nothing to do, time seems to crawl. The challenge for service organizations is to give customers something to do or to distract them while waiting. For example, BMW car owners can wait in comfort in BMW service centers where waiting areas

are furnished with designer furniture, plasma TVs, Wi-Fi hotspots, magazines, and freshly brewed cappuccino. Many customers even bring their own entertainment in the form of a cell phone with messaging and games, an MP3 player, or a personal play station.

- *Solo waits feel longer than group waits.* Waiting with one or more people you know is reassuring. Conversation with friends can help to pass the time, but not everyone is comfortable talking to a stranger.
- *Physically uncomfortable waits feel longer than comfortable waits.* "My feet are killing me!" is one of the most frequently heard comments when people are forced to stand in line for a long time. And whether they are seated or standing, waiting seems more burdensome if the temperature is too hot or too cold, if it's drafty or windy, or if there's no protection from rain or snow.
- *Pre- and post-process waits feel longer than in-process waits.* Waiting to buy a ticket to enter a theme park is different from waiting to ride on a roller coaster once you're in the park.
- *Unfair waits are longer than equitable waits.* Perceptions about what is fair or unfair sometimes vary from one culture or country to another. In the United States, Canada, or Britain, for example, people expect everybody to wait their turn in line and are likely to get irritated if they see others jumping ahead or given priority for apparently no good reason.
- *Unfamiliar waits seem longer than familiar ones.* Frequent users of a service know what to expect and are less likely to worry while waiting. New or occasional users, by contrast, often are nervous, wondering not only about the probable length of the wait but also about what happens next.
- *Uncertain waits are longer than known, finite waits.* Although any wait may be frustrating, we usually can adjust mentally to a wait of a known length. It's the unknown that keeps us on edge. Imagine waiting for a delayed flight and not being told how long the delay is going to be. You don't know whether you have the time to get up and walk about in the terminal or whether to stay at the gate in case the flight is called any minute.
- *Unexplained waits are longer than explained waits.* Have you ever been in a subway or an elevator that has stopped for no apparent reason, without anyone telling you why? In addition to uncertainty about the length of the wait, there's added worry about what is going to happen. Has there been an accident on the line? Will you be stuck for hours in close proximity with strangers?
- *Anxiety makes waits seem longer.* Can you remember waiting for someone to show at a rendezvous, and worrying about whether you had gotten the time or location correct? While waiting in unfamiliar locations, especially outdoors and at night, people often worry about their personal safety.
- *The more valuable or important the service, the longer people will wait.* People will queue up overnight under uncomfortable conditions to get good seats to a major concert or sports event expected to sell out fast.