

Making time fly: ISU professor studies how to moderate waiting time with customers

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We've all been there. You decide to go out for dinner and after being seated, you can't get service from the wait staff. Or you're at the airport waiting on flight delays and stuck in the customer service line, desperately trying to get answers.

Most people hate to wait. An Iowa State University marketing professor who studies waiting time and its emotional effect on consumers says how the experience goes may determine whether a customer comes back.

It may even create opportunity, says Deanne Brocato, an assistant professor of marketing at ISU.

"Even when you have a service failure (like longer wait times), what we see is that you can create a stronger bond with consumers, based on how you deal with it," she said.

Brocato worked with a research team on a study examining the waiting experiences of 844 customers in the banking and hair-cutting service industries (405 banking, 439 hair cutting) from two medium-sized metropolitan areas in the southeastern United States. The researchers found that five factors moderate perceived waiting time dissatisfaction and regret among consumers:

- How wait time is filled
- How customer anxiety is addressed
- Whether commitment to the customer is demonstrated

- Perceived justice
- Quality physical environment

Brocato collaborated with Julie Baker, an associate professor of marketing at Texas Christian University; Clay Voorhees, an assistant professor of marketing and supply chain management at Michigan State University; Brian Bourdeau, an assistant professor of marketing at Auburn University; and J. Joseph Cronin, Jr., The Carl DeSantis Professor of Business Administration at Florida State University, on the study. They have authored a research paper, which is currently under review by an academic journal.

The paper cites a 2006 study by emarketer.com which found that consumers would rather clean their bathrooms, sit in traffic, or visit their dentists than stand in line. When they became too frustrated with waiting, 32 percent of consumers in that study reported that they left without purchasing anything, and 31 percent complained to a manager, staff or other customers.

The researchers provide the following advice to service firms on how to more effectively manage their customers' waiting experiences:

- Distract customers from focusing on the wait. "If customers do not pay close attention to the delay, they may be less likely to think about how long they are waiting," wrote the researchers. They site examples of how airports now broadcast cable news on monitors in terminals, and how some restaurants provide customers with menus early in their wait.
- Identify potential sources of waiting anxiety, and address them specifically. If customers are anxious because of the uncertainty over the wait, the authors recommend that managers provide them information about the estimated wait time and/or causes for the wait. Research also has shown that music can effectively reduce anxiety. And when

customers' anxiety is due to situations unrelated to the service experience -- such as being late -- managers may be able to develop a process for identifying customers who have situational constraints and provide a way to expedite the service.

-- Decrease customers' perceptions of wait inequalities. The study suggests that, when feasible, managers might design different queues for different customer segments (i.e.: express, frequent flier gold/platinum, etc.) to ensure the procedures are deemed fair -- providing proper education and/or signage in the process.

-- Identify and insulate customers with affective commitment.

"Customers with an affective commitment to a service organization provide a service firm with a strong customer base," the researchers wrote. "Therefore, management should make every attempt to see that this group of customers is not dissatisfied."

-- Design a more desirable atmosphere in which to wait. The study recommends that managers design comfortable places where waiting customers can sit and that they should make sure the temperature and noise levels are within customers' range of comfort. "Large windows overlooking a beautiful view and/or interesting art on the walls may distract customers from paying close attention to the time spent waiting for service," wrote the authors.

Brocato also sees self-service as another effective wait time option.

"There's another paper that I'm looking into where people go into the self-checkout and they actually are waiting longer, but they have control over their wait," she said. "So when you're in control, the wait seems shorter."

And when it comes to waiting, customer perception apparently is

everything.

Source: Iowa State University

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