

When shorter waits increase stress

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People hate to wait, says common customer service insight. Marketers will hype their earnest attempts to shorten waiting times or at least promise to provide customers with information or distractions to make the waiting time more palatable. However, when it comes to waiting for stressful events, such as a doctor's appointments or a job interview, these types of well-meaning wait management strategies may backfire. New research published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that the effectiveness of wait-related customer service depends upon the nature of the waited-for event.

“Wait management strategies that are effective in Disney World may cause more stress if implemented in a hospital waiting room,” explain Elizabeth Gelfand Miller (Boston College), Barbara E. Kahn (University of Miami), and Mary Frances Luce (Duke University). “Given that waiting has historically been viewed as negative and that it is likely the only stressor during many (positive) service encounters, shorter waits are generally viewed as better than longer waits. However, we propose that the wait itself can facilitate coping with negative events, and thus, that longer waits may result in less stress.”

For example, one study in the paper involved college students waiting to participate in a group discussion about an undisclosed topic. Some students were informed that they were expected to give an impromptu speech as part of a Career Services exercise and would be judged on demeanor and appearance. Others were told they would merely observe. In the follow-up questionnaire, students who had been in the neutral waiting condition were far more likely to rate the waiting duration as

their biggest source of annoyance. In contrast, those who had been told they had to give a speech used the waiting time to mentally prepare for the discussion group.

“When the waited-for event is negative, [we] found that consumers were less concerned about potential stress that came from waiting. In fact, in some cases consumers actually preferred extra waiting time so that they could cope with the impending event,” the researchers explain. “In an experiment where participants were required to wait before engaging in a specific task, shorter waiting times and information about how long the wait would be reduced total stress for those waiting for neutral events, but increased total stress for those waiting for negative events.”

In another experiment, college students were asked to rank several short films. The experiment was designed so that participants in the negative condition were really watching a film they found difficult to watch, and the aversive choices included the descriptions: “a video of the Twin Towers collapsing on 9-11-01” and “a video of a missile hitting a passenger train in Kosovo killing 14 civilians.”

They were then asked to wait as the film they least liked or a neutral film was loaded on to their computer. Some students simply saw the words “film loading . . .” for three minutes while others were given a countdown of how much time was left. Those who received a countdown while waiting to watch a film they did not want to see reported significantly greater stress. Notably, there was no difference in stress between the two groups when no information about the time left was provided. Participants were given the option to discontinue watching the film at any time, and several did so.

“Our work provides a new perspective on managing waits. While the waiting literature has historically viewed waits as something negative that should be reduced, we demonstrate that the validity of this

assumption is contingent on the situation,” write Miller, Kahn, and Luce. “Traditional strategies that focus only on the wait and not the overall experience may result in wait management strategies that can exacerbate overall customer satisfaction rather than improve it.”

Source: University of Chicago

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