

Wait lines may boost perceived popularity of restaurant brands

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Restaurants can benefit from keeping their customers waiting, according to a new study from researchers in the Penn State School of Hospitality Management.

The research, led by Associate Professor of Hospitality Management Breffni Noone and published in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, found that the presence of a pre-process wait line, such as waiting to be seated at a restaurant, can increase perceived [brand popularity](#) of the business among first-time customers. The work is [published](#) in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*.

This effect is increased when paired with a brand popularity statement from an organization that is independent of the restaurant. Brand popularity statements convey widespread use of the brand, such as a review labeling the business "most popular" within a given location, displayed on signage by the restaurant.

"You do not always have to try to eliminate pre-process wait lines," Noone said. "In fact, it might benefit operators to have a visible wait line. The idea is that first-time consumers will see the line and think the restaurant is a popular spot. In turn, it will have a positive effect on the anticipation of the experience they are going to have."

The researchers conducted two studies to examine how wait times affect businesses. The first study surveyed 156 people in the United States via Prolific, a platform used in hospitality consumer research. Participants were shown pictures of a fictitious casual restaurant that either had or did not have a wait line or brand popularity statement.

"Restaurants, [retail businesses](#), night clubs, bars and [theme parks](#) can use these findings to help increase their perceived brand popularity while also eliminating unnecessary costs that could be centered around minimizing wait times," Noone said. "It can be superb to have a wait line if you have a lot of first-time customers who use your facility."

A wait line is a signal of popularity and can be a driver of the perceived quality of the experience, but it can become problematic when

customers wait so long that it becomes irritating, according to Noone.

To explore how the length of wait time could affect the perception of customers, the researchers conducted a second study that surveyed 269 people in the United States via Prolific. Like the first study, participants were shown pictures of a fictitious casual restaurant that either had or did not have a wait line or brand popularity statement. This time, however, participants were randomly assigned to lines with 0-, 15-, 30- or 45-minute [wait times](#).

Noone said the findings showed that customers were willing to wait 15 minutes for service before the positive effects of perceived brand popularity began to lessen due to waiting. The presence of a brand popularity statement softened this effect.

"It can come down to whether the customer is time or price sensitive," Noone said. "Time-sensitive people may be attracted to the popularity of the line but do not want to wait in it. They want the privilege of going earlier in the line and thus purchase items—like a fast pass at a theme park—to jump ahead. Meanwhile, price-sensitive people will choose to wait in the lines for a longer amount of time."

If customers become frustrated after a long wait time, businesses would need to recover the customers' trust during the time of service, such as providing exemplary service after a customer is seated at a restaurant, according to Noone.

"When businesses deal with a large first-time customer base, having a visible wait line can be a positive thing," Noone said. "Businesses should not throw away resources trying to eliminate wait lines. The issue comes when people wait long enough that it becomes harmful for the business."

Michael S. Lin of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University collaborated on

this project.

More information: Breffni M. Noone et al, Exploring the upside of waiting: The positive effects of waiting as a cue to brand popularity, *International Journal of Hospitality Management* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2024.103691](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2024.103691)

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