

CUSTOMER-FOCUS: Thanks for Wasting my Time!

By David H. McNair

Born to wait.

For such a rush-rush, productivity-centered society, we sure do spend a lot of time waiting. If it's not 'holding' on the phone, we find ourselves in serpentine teller lines, grocery stores, doctors' offices, and even at home for that "afternoon" service appointment with the cable installer. According to a study by America's Research Group, 91% of men and 83% of women say that excessive waiting at checkout is a primary reason they elect to shop elsewhere. Now there's a tidbit of information you can take to the bank. If that statistic doesn't make you question how you keep your customers waiting, then please go directly to reading your horoscope, cause this article won't help you at all.

The elimination of excessive waiting is one of the primary drivers of success for the Internet service junkies. When conducting e-business, the transaction is on YOUR time; 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You can search, shop, order, confirm order and be thanked for your order all in a matter of minutes.

Puzzling alternatives.

For many businesses; however, the Internet is not an option – or so they think. How then can we address wait times better? It shouldn't take you walking into your doctor's office to then be informed that they are running 45 minutes behind schedule. After all, the office files probably contain your work number, home number and even a cellular or pager number. Is a 30-second call attempt not worth the avoidance of your hour of frustration in the doctor's front office? Even if a failed attempt was made to reach you, you'd feel better about the effort having been made. Tip for the day: go into your place of business and experience *waiting*. If a wait of some sort is almost inevitable, what are you doing to make it more pleasant for your customers? Do you have the appropriate variety of reading materials? How about a TV, games, puzzles (and I'm not just talking about for kids here). Puzzles are mind-challenging, fun, and best of all...time flies when we're engaged in one. Refreshments are always nice. Car service shops have done this for years, but for most businesses, this is a foreign concept.

It really doesn't matter whether you are a law office, a hotel, a bank, a hospital or a car dealership. Ask your front receptionist(s) how long most customers wait during peak busy times? Consider the waiting/holding on the phone as well as in person. How are you creatively asking your customers to endure the delays? I recently was in a waiting room/reception area, and noticed a computer terminal with direct AOL access to the Internet. (With the ever-lowering cost of computers today, I bet this cost less than the sofa I was sitting on.) In any event, I logged on, and the next 20 minutes flew by as I surfed a few sites waiting for my appointment.

Home Sweet Home.

Now, for all those services that require someone to be home to receive their service – best suggestion is that you exhaust all innovative avenues to deal with this better. Fact is, most people “work” during the day. And for many, scheduling an afternoon to meet the service technician is an afternoon without pay, or at the very least, without accomplishment! Even the horrible expression of ‘stay-at-home-Mom’ is a gross misnomer. Who’s at home for any extended period of time? Just for kicks, I asked four Moms (with at least 2-4 children under the age of 16) how many miles they averaged on their car in the past year. The average was 23,400! Point is -- few of us have time to give half-a-day to wait on the electrician, plumber, or delivery person of choice.

Power of the Promise.

Service guarantees can be highly effective, and they’re used too seldom. Georgia Power has a great service guarantee. If your residential power is not working on the day promised, you will receive \$100 per day credit until it is. Personally, I always appreciated the lunchtime hooks that many restaurants initiated...*if you’re not served in 15 minutes or less, the lunch is on them!* This type of guarantee is effective for so many applications. Last week, I had some rather voluminous copying to be done. I took it to the copy center in one of those office megastores. How comfortable I felt when they said if it wasn’t ready on time, it was FREE. There is just something reassuring about people who put their money where their mouth is. This is something that every pharmacy should institute. After all, is there anything worse than waiting on a prescription when you’ve already endured the doctor’s office, and you feel like a run-over raccoon anyway. Have you considered the appropriateness of a service guarantee for your business? If you are too afraid of the potential costs of a guarantee, maybe that’s your first warning sign. Too bad you don’t see the costs of your customers walking to the competition due to excessive waiting or missed commitments. You might rethink your service.

Someone worth waiting for: Pat at Piggly Wiggly

How many times when you were waiting in line, have you actually switched to the *longer* line? Never I bet. Well I did this recently at the Piggly Wiggly in Wando Crossing. You see, I wanted to be served by Pat, and the wait was worth it. Anyone who has ever shopped this store knows Pat. She’s more than a fixture there – she’s an attraction. She is always so positive. She takes time to not only know your name, but those of your family as well. She’ll engage you in any conversation from the weather to football. She’s truly a delight to meet. Thanks Pat for how you delight your many customers each day!