

# How to deal with delays, kill queues

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The single most-cited source of frustration for customers is delays and long queues. Your company needs to take this seriously because when customers are kept waiting patience turns to frustration very quickly - and they then start looking for other things that have gone wrong.

Waiting customers, in their frustration, may make a scene, exaggerating the delay, ("I've been waiting here for hours now!"), or over-simplifying what needs to happen, ("What does it take to just go and fetch the thing from the stores!"). Some may make unrealistic demands, ("If you don't get it to me in the next 10 minutes, I'll go somewhere else"), or suggest difficult, expensive or impossible solutions, ("Why don't you just hire more staff, for goodness sake!")

At best, the credibility of the business takes a dive, at worst we lose customers by the dozen. There will be times in your business when customers will have to unavoidably wait, but even so, the most important thing is how you react to the delay that makes the difference.

## Deal with it

So what can a business do to deal with this so that it doesn't end up with hordes of unhappy customers? Here are some suggestions:

1. First **identify hold-ups and slowness**. This may sound obvious, but it never ceases to amaze me how out-of-touch many managers are with what is happening in their businesses. They are often surprised when customers tell them how bad things really get. Therefore, make sure that you have some way of identifying and measuring the time it takes to process customer orders, and for "red-flagging" long delays and queues.
2. **Ask why** the delays exist in the first place, and do whatever you can to eliminate the root causes. In the majority of cases, you will find that customer complaints are justified, because to carry out the necessary work does not take that long in reality.

Delays can be caused by poor systems, overworked, demotivated or apathetic staff, overloaded processes which cannot get products and services out, work not done right the first time, and so on. If a little investigative work is done, you will probably find the root causes of delays very quickly, and first prize is to eliminate the causes as soon as possible.

In one major life insurance company, it recently reduced the time it takes to process a claim from a few *days* to a few

*hours*, and discovered that most of the time it took to process a claim was not time spent working on the claim, but rather the fact that the claim was waiting on someone's desk for further processing. (Who says Just-In-Time principles doesn't work in a service environment?)

3. **Be proactive** when it comes to communicating with customers. So much trouble can be avoided by talking to your customers *before* they even notice that there is a problem and start getting irritated. Apologise for the wait, and if you can, explain the reasons for the delay. Most people are naturally curious and just telling them that you are sorry is not enough.
4. **Ask for patience.** Unless you are really skilled at being warm and empathetic with customers, it is probably also not going to help if you *tell* them to be patient. You have to be genuine and sincere in this request, and make sure that they know that you care. Demanding their patience is just not on. I recently found myself on a plane which was delayed on the runway, and the pilot came onto the system before we even knew there was a delay. After apologising sincerely, he told us exactly why this had happened, and reassured the passengers that everything would be fine. Which brings us to the next point...
5. If possible, tell customers exactly **how long the delay will be**, and what you and the company are currently doing to sort out the problem. If you are unable to give a fixed time for the end of the problem, then you have to do a great job of explaining what is going to happen next, and reassuring them that they will be taken care of before others are processed.
6. In a business where customers have to wait their turn, and they know who was before and after them, there are two additional things that need to happen: obviously, never compromise yourself by allowing late-comers to jump the queue without an extremely good explanation. But also **keep informing** those still in the queue how far they are from the top of the list. I have seen this working very effectively even with some telephone systems, where, every once in a while, you hear, "There are now 12 calls before yours will be answered."
7. While customers are waiting, **keep them busy**. Some stores install a television monitor visible at *every single* till point in the store, and customers watch funny videos (and a few ads), while they wait for their turn. I'm willing to bet that customers are far less aggressive about the queues, and that the cost of magazines damaged while being read at the till has also dropped. Music on the telephone is another example, although many people today find this irritating. Try to make sure that someone live is regularly, (every 40 seconds or so), getting back to the waiting caller.

My all-time favourite story involves Virgin Mobile, where the person at the contact centre patiently told the customer she would call back in a few minutes because the system was slow that morning. When he insisted on waiting, she casually asked him "By the way, what's your favourite song?" Caught by surprise, he eventually said, "Uuhm. 'New York, New York', by Frank Sinatra." After a pause, she replied, "Oh, I know that one. Please feel free to join in," and she started singing the song for him! It created an incredibly loyal customer.

8. Finally, **help customers with preliminary work** which may save time later, such as, for example, giving them the contract to work through, training them to use their new appliance, or arranging for payment processing. This is also symbolically useful because it shows them that you understand their need for speed. As an alternative, you may offer customers the option of partially filling their orders so that they can get on with something else. If this occurs, you also need to offer to deliver the balance of their order at your company's own expense. But also broadcast this fact to your colleagues because it is a very effective way of helping them to understand how expensive delays can be to the company.

Delays and queues may be something which you and your customers may experience occasionally for a number of reasons, and is often beyond your control. But, once you have a system for identifying them when they happen, it is *how you react* to them that is so critically important.

Make sure that people in your organisation are sensitive enough to understand the impact on customers, does something to

lessen the frustration, and help customers minimise the impact of the problems.

## ABOUT AKI KALLIATAKIS

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