Challenging conventional wisdom: Positive waiting

Gerard Ryan a,b, *, Gilda-María Hernández-Maskivker a, Mireia Valverde a, b, Maria-del-Mar Pàmies-Pallisé a

a Department of Business Management, Faculty of Business & Economics, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Avinguda Universitat 1, Reus, Tarragona, Spain
b Visiting Fellow at ILR School, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

- Call to re-examine the conventional wisdom that waiting for service is negative.
- Forwards 5 propositions on the positive effects of waiting in tourism.
- Calls for research on waiting to take on a renewed exploratory role.
- Research should examine the tipping point, where positive waiting turns negative.

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ABSTRACT

This paper calls for a re-examination of the conventional wisdom that making consumers wait for service is necessarily negative. This is important because after three decades of research on waiting, consumers still spend a considerable amount of time waiting, in an ever-widening range of contexts. And although there is a continuous and steady stream of waiting studies, there have been few significant advances in our understanding in recent years. We forward a set of challenging propositions that consider the positive effects of waiting. In contrast to established thinking, we propose that waiting attracts more consumers; increases perceived value; provides information to facilitate consumer decision-making; improves customer evaluations; and encourages positive anticipation. The propositions are supported theoretically and empirically by drawing on related disciplines. With this paper, we aim to stimulate new and innovative discussion around the topic of waiting, with particular emphasis on waiting in tourism services, and to question accepted knowledge in order to begin laying the basis for the next phase of research on consumer waiting.

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1. Introduction

In order to advance our understanding of the challenges facing management, every so often researchers are called upon to question conventional wisdom, to re-examine the evidence and to re-evaluate the obvious solutions (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Waiting in services has been studied extensively and consistently across a range of disciplines including operations research, services marketing and consumer behavior (Hornik, 1984; Maister, 1985; Jones & Peppard, 1996; Pàmies, Ryan, & Valverde, 2016b). The fundamental premise of waiting research is that the longer consumers wait, the less favorable they will evaluate services (Taylor, 1995). Therefore, the almost singular end-goal of waiting research is to reduce waiting times. Yet, despite a considerable and sustained research effort over three decades and an extensive literature on waiting, consumers are still devoting a considerable portion of their time to waiting for service (Giebelhausen, Robinson, & Cronin, 2011). This includes waiting in an increasing range of situations, with more recent incorporations including waiting on the telephone (Munichor & Rafaeli, 2007; Mehrotra, Ross, Ryder, & Zhou, 2012) waiting on the Internet (Ryan & Valverde, 2005, 2006; Lee, Chen, & Llie, 2012) and waiting in virtual environments (Hwang, 2018...
Indeed, it is our contention that research on consumer waiting over the previous decade has become entrenched in the existing paradigm, with little scope for new or innovative thinking on the issues. We suggest that notwithstanding the continual flow of new waiting studies, we are consistently revisiting the same research questions we have considered since the early 1990s. Though we are waiting studies, we are consistently revisiting the same research queues (Hwang et al., 2012; Brown, Kappes, (Demoulin & Borges, Herter, 2013), self-service technologies (Kokkinou et al., 2016; Rendeiro Martin-Cejas, 2006; Minton, 2008; De Lange, 1999). As tourists we wait in line at airports to check-in, to get off the plane, to collect luggage, to go to our hotel, where we often wait again to check in. During our vacations, we wait at restaurants, theatres, museums and theme parks. Indeed, a typical visit to a popular theme park may involve more time waiting than time experiencing the rides and attractions (Heger, Offermans, & Frens, 2009). Tourism and hospitality operations make decisions on capacity and demand management, striving to balance guest satisfaction and comfort with operational efficiency (Pullman & Thompson, 2002). Therefore, waiting is an ubiquitous part of the contemporary tourist experience (Dawes & Rowley, 1996; Gilbert & Wong, 2003; Gnoth et al., 2006) and a major concern for management as research suggests that waiting may have a considerable negative effect on tourist satisfaction (Dickson et al., 2005).

The aim of this paper is to advance our understanding of waiting behavior by reconsidering the conventional wisdom that the only solution to waiting is to minimize it. By highlighting some of the positive interpretations that waiting evokes, new perspectives and more appropriate solutions to this enduring issue may emerge. We do this by forwarding a series of propositions that contemplate the potentially positive effects of waiting for companies. We do not contest the widely held view that consumers do not like to wait, but we argue that under certain conditions consumers may willingly wait and may even choose a longer wait over a shorter wait. In contrast to conventional thinking, we propose that waiting may attract more consumers, increase perceived value, provide information to facilitate consumer decision-making, improve customer evaluations and encourage positive anticipation. We base these propositions on theories and concepts drawn from a range of disciplines and we support them with empirical evidence drawn from existing studies. We conceptualize these propositions as ‘positive waiting’.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Firstly, we review the literature on waiting in services in order to consider the pervasive emphasis on the negative aspects of waiting. We examine the strategies designed to reduce both real and perceived waiting times. We then consider the grounds for questioning the conventional wisdom on waiting and we set forth a series of propositions based on a positive conceptualization of waiting. Finally, the implications and suggestions for future research are outlined.

2. Waiting in services

Studies show that waiting can reduce customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Chang & Yang, 2008; Davis & Heineke, 1994; Lee & Lambert, 2006; Hensley & Sulek, 2007; Li, 2010). Therefore, research in marketing almost always interprets waiting as a problem. Indeed, it is generally accepted that waiting is universally disliked by consumers, regardless of culture (Rose, Evaristo, & Straub, 2003; Pomers, Ryan, & Valverde, 2016a, 2016b). Time spent waiting is considered wasted time (Fung, 2006) because it is a scarce resource that could be used for something more productive (Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dube, 1995). Waiting makes consumers feel bored, annoyed, agitated and irritated (Rafaeli, Barron, & Haber, 2002; Taylor, 1994; Pynn & Smidts, 1998; Larson, 1987). As the wait often occurs at the beginning of a service encounter, it is frequently the first experience customers have with companies (McGuire, Kimes, Lynn, Pullman, & Lloyd, 2010; Davis & Heineke, 1998). Therefore, initial delays may have a considerable and enduring negative effect on the overall evaluation of a service (Dickson et al., 2005; Lee & Lambert, 2000; Pynn & Smidts, 1998; Taylor, 1994; Hui & Tse, 1996). Sometimes consumers will simply abandon a service rather than wait (Carmon, Shanthikumar, & Carmon, 1995; Friedman & Friedman, 1997; Zhou & Soman, 2003), and even if they decide to endure a wait, they may avoid that service on future occasions (Carmon et al., 1995; Bielen & Demoulin, 2007; Davis & Vollmann, 1990; McDougall & Levesque, 1999). Therefore, researchers and practitioners endeavor to design services that reduce or eliminate waiting times (Hui & Tse, 1996; Kostecki, 1996; Van & Lotz, 2006).

However, consumers often do not accurately calculate how long they wait. In this sense, we can differentiate between the time a consumer perceives they wait and the actual, objective or real time they wait (Jones & Peppiatt, 1996). Real or objective waiting times are reduced by extending opening hours, operating at maximum capacity level, opening more checkouts or employing more service
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