

Can't shorten the wait? Change its "perception."

by Mark Collins



A recent *Blondie* comic strip simply sums up the frustration many people feel about waiting. Dagwood is on hold on his portable phone while proclaiming to Blondie how great it is that the automated system is telling him he's the 6th caller in line. Blondie smiles as only a comic strip wife can do. The next frame shows Dagwood as the 5th caller, and he expresses confidence that he'll be talking to a real human in no time. Frame three is now hours later; Dagwood is in bed frustrated by the cheery robotic recording reminding him that he's now the 2nd caller in line. A totally dejected Dagwood proclaims he can't hang up now, and the ever-positive Blondie reminds him that at least he's an important customer! Far from the truth? Not by a long shot for many.

Whoever coined the old English proverb, "All good things come to those who wait" wasn't on hold on the telephone (carrier pigeons flew non-stop back then), in traffic, waiting for a meeting to start, or anxiously sitting in a hospital waiting room. According to Shirley Taylor, in *"Waiting for Service: The Relationship Between Delays and Evaluations of Service,"* customers can wait before, during, or after a purchase. They can wait because there is a line-up, there is a delay, or they arrived early for an appointment." Given that waiting is inevitable in almost every service encounter, there are two options: speed up the time to service (which isn't always possible), or change the way the waiting time is perceived.

Life is truly a waiting game. What researchers have arguably discovered is that it's not so much the wait itself that is the issue, but what happens during the wait and the perception of that wait that really matters to most consumers.

According to David A. Maister, in his article *"The Psychology of Waiting Lines,"* the "perceived value affects the tolerance of waits." Restaurants dish up a great example of Maister's theory: "We'll accept a much longer wait for haute cuisine than for the food served at a "greasy spoon."

Healthcare presents its own unique challenges to the waiting game. Patients wait on the phone to get an appointment; wait for screenings, surgery, to see their doctor; then wait again to receive additional information and test results, and lest we forget, wait even more to have prescriptions filled and then filled again and again. This goes for patients, families, and employees as well.

Many years before the advent of cable television, the internet, and smart phones, people were forced to wait on hold on the phone with—if they were lucky—music. And believe it or not, many hospitals still only have music as an on-hold listening option instead of timely, useful information. People also made do in the waiting room devouring the remnants of the local newspaper (rarely a current issue), tattered copies of *National Geographic* and *Popular Mechanics* or a stray brochure or two about the facility. Smoking was allowed in the waiting room and just about everywhere. So these seemed to be the only options to "while away the time."

Fast forward to today. In some healthcare facilities, there are now televisions and brochures in more plentiful supply in many waiting areas. Also, unfortunately, you can still find the ubiquitous copies of those tired newspapers and magazines and, on occasion, the pamphlets the pharmaceutical reps have left behind.

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The big question for hospital marketers is how are you seizing the marketing and PR opportunities and enhancing the waiting experience as part of the total patient experience for your communities, patients, and employees? Are you making these waits interesting, engaging, and even remotely relevant or fun? Do your patients and employees feel valued? Do you make them feel important enough that they would never consider going to your competitor? These are questions that only you can answer.

Remarkably, some hospitals are making strides in changing the perception of waiting. Callers at Kingston, North Carolina's Lenoir Memorial Hospital report that the time they spend on hold is now valuable time spent learning about upcoming events and the hospital is able to strengthen its connection with the local community as a trusted health resource. "Our [on-hold system](#) is a great way for us to promote community health programming messages," remarks Constance E. Hengel, Director, Community Programming and Development, Lenoir Memorial Hospital.

Maister and other experts suggest that whatever the activity you choose to fill customers' time, it should be relevant in some way to the upcoming service encounter and offer a benefit in and of itself to the consumer.

Visual imagery is also critical to enhancing the waiting experience. Houston, Texas-based American Art Resources, a company providing artwork to hospitals around the country believes in the power of visual images. In fact, their tagline is "Transforming the healthcare experience through art."

According to Upali Nanda PhD, Assoc. AIA, Edac, Vice President and Director of Research at American Art Resources, the amount of time one waits is one of the most important concerns for people visiting, in particular, Emergency Departments (ED). Their belief is that perceived waiting times and experiential quality of that time can be affected by the quality of the physical environment.

They studied the effect that still and video nature art has on patients, as well as visitor behavior in the ED. Their contention is that "affective states" (i.e. "moods"; simply stated) significantly impact the perception of the wait time. Furthermore, they report that there's substantial evidence that nature art reduces stress levels and anxiety, perhaps positively impacting the waiting experience.

Finally, American Art Resources observed that a beneficial by-product of visual images in waiting areas includes significant reductions in restlessness, noise levels, and, of all things, people staring at other people. A significant decrease in the number of queries made at the front desk and a significant increase in social interaction were also reported.

Art, patient education, news, lifestyle, and more in digital formats are also serving to change the perception of the wait in real-time, relevant, and captivating displays. HIPAA and other regulations have increased the complexity of informing and managing patients. However, digital signage has the ability to keep up with changing times and ensure information is current. Simple, thematic messages that ask people to do something, not only help engage audiences but increase the odds patients will take action by attending screenings and classes and making appointments with physicians, among others. Digital displays in lobbies, cafeterias, and even patient rooms are helping to alleviate anxiety with "what to expect" information as they also help improve access to care.

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Changing the perception of the wait involves many factors, and the ability to customize the waiting experience for individuals based on where they are waiting makes a difference. The right visually captivating high-definition display can have the power to transform this experience if the messaging is on target. "We take great care when planning our [digital signage](#) content library to ensure we have enough message options and versions which are relevant to different audiences," says Tim Rogers, VP Technology and Product Development, Vericom. "The other critical component is evaluating flow and wait times to create audience-specific programming guides for our clients that are easy to follow and minimize the amount of work required."

As we manage our patients' and customers' expectations of the wait – whether by being visual (through art, signage, or television), tactile (print), or auditory (phone messaging), we need to keep Maisters' simple yet intuitive principles in mind. We need to make our communications meaningful, relevant, engaging, easy-to-understand, and above all, in this age of social media engagement, current.

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