

# The Washington Post

## Hang Tight for Better Phone Holds

The next time you're on interminable phone hold, consider this: If you're hearing music--and you like the tune--the wait probably won't seem so bad.

That's what two Georgia professors discovered in an experiment they conducted at a private company's call center where customers seek technical help. The results, just published in an article in "The Journal of Service Research," show that customers' satisfaction increased if they liked the music they heard while on hold. **The music made the wait seem to go faster.**

Naveen Donthu, a Georgia State marketing professor, and Anita Whiting of Clayton State College say an important piece of customer satisfaction is the perception of how long a customer thinks a wait is, whether it's in line at a store or on hold on the phone. They pointed to several earlier studies that showed **the longer customers believe they waited, the more negatively those customers evaluated a company's service.**

Donthu and Whiting set out to study how to improve that wait--or more accurately the perception of the wait--while on phone hold. In their experiment, half the customers heard music; the other half heard nothing. Each of these groups was further divided into four more categories. One group was given no information about how long the wait would be before reaching a help-desk agent; another was told how many minutes it would take. A third group was told how many people were waiting ahead of them while the fourth was given both the time it would take and the number of people in the queue. After transactions were finished, the customers were surveyed in e-mails about their wait-time experiences.

The experiment found no difference in perceived waiting times between those who were told how long the wait would be or their number in the queue--or both--and those who did not. However, the study did find that people who liked the music they heard while waiting thought they had a smaller wait time. **Some of the respondents said they liked to hear the music because they knew they were still connected to the company; no music made them wonder if they were still on hold.**

So what does this mean? **The professors say companies should try and play music that fits their target audiences. And firms should try to change the songs because customers get tired of listening to same, old music every time they call in.**

In their paper, the professors also disclosed a wonderful research nugget that helps explain a question I'm sure you've probably never even asked: "Why do hotel lobbies have mirrors all around their elevators?" Well, it seems that one hotel, after being inundated with complaints about excessive waits for the elevator, decided to reduce the perception of the wait. It installed mirrors, and learned that "perception of the wait decreased and complaints declined" as guests checked their appearances in the mirrors.

Maybe that's the real solution to long phone holds -- put mirrors by our phones!