

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SERVICE DELAY IN SUPERMARKETS AND POST OFFICES

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ABSTRACT

Findings from a mail survey in Britain are reported. A large proportion of the sample did not mind queuing in supermarkets and post offices. Those who disliked waiting expected to be delayed more often, held management responsible and received less benefit from the service encounter.

INTRODUCTION

Delay in supermarkets, post offices and other retail outlets is fairly predictable. In these settings it is likely that the confirmation model of consumer dissatisfaction applies, i.e. that the consumer's experience produces little arousal but reinforces his/her pre-existing negative attitude (Oliver, 1989). People may say that they dislike queuing at the checkout but it is rare that they express resentment to retail managements. Predictable outcomes, whether agreeable or disagreeable, seem to produce little action. By contrast the reactions to unexpected outcomes are more robust; here the disconfirmation model of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (CS/D) applies and people are more motivated to take action to reduce their dissatisfaction.

Despite the popularity of disconfirmation treatments of CS/D there are at least two reasons why we should give careful attention to those contexts where service deficiencies are both expected and received. The first is that predictably bad service is a fertile ground for drastic improvements that confound expectation; i.e. it provides a basis for positive disconfirmations. The second is that the predictability of bad service has usually come about because it is frequently experienced; thus any improvement that is introduced will also be frequently experienced and will be the more valuable because of its frequency.

When experience is repeated without the need

for repeated conscious decisions (on purchase for example) the psychological process of habituation may occur; stimuli lose their impact and change is impeded. As a result consumers may tolerate product inadequacies more when they experience them frequently; similarly service providers may fail to see the inadequacies of the product offered if they have grown used to it. Elsewhere this has been discussed at greater length (East, 1989).

Despite habituation some customers may try to avoid delay by shifting their demand to quiet times. This is a response to service inadequacy and may be compared with other responses such as switching and complaining. We have been unable to find any research on voluntary demand shifting despite its importance to the efficient operation of retail outlets. This topic is explored at greater length in a report *Demand Over Time* by East, Lomax and Willson (1991).

Other research on queuing has tended to focus on the way in which people respond at the time when they incur delays (Schmitt reviewed by Carmon, 1991; Dube-Rioux, Schmitt and Leclerc 1989); such work is useful to those who seek to ameliorate the queuing experience.

Reactions to supermarket delay such as demand shifting are likely to be affected by the extent to which the delay is disliked and by the factors associated with the delay. The study reported here explores these matters.

Procedure

A postal survey was used which was conducted in March and April, 1991. Questionnaires were sent with a covering letter to one thousand names and addresses drawn at random from the telephone directories of England and Wales with a follow-up letter and new questionnaire three weeks later if no response had been obtained. Post paid envelopes were provided. This procedure gave a total response

rate of 49% and a usable response rate of 45% which was highly satisfactory for a questionnaire with 53 items.

The questionnaire contained:

1. A group of questions covering the respondents' reactions to queuing, whether they disliked it, who they held responsible, and how long they expected to wait at busy and quiet times.
2. A group of demographic items covering age, sex, income, number in household and employment status.
3. Many other questions directed at use of supermarkets and post offices and knowledge of congestions which are not discussed in this paper but are examined by East, Lomax and Willson (1991).

The full questionnaire together with response frequencies is available from the author.

Results are reported by valid response percentages and base.

Reactions to Queuing

Table 1 shows respondents' expectations of having to wait in line in supermarkets and post offices. Table 2 shows the expected delay at checkouts and post offices at quiet and busy times. An average delay was obtained from the products of mean duration and percentage. The items on supermarkets and post offices are not exactly comparable but the evidence suggests that the delay expected in the supermarket is slightly longer than that expected in the post office. (Lunch time in a post office is, by general repute, the most congested period because of staff at lunch).

An interesting feature of Table 2 is the delay expected at quiet times. Frequently supermarkets allow queues to develop because too few checkouts are open; the same practice may occur with counters in post offices. Table 2 indicates that consumers only expect to save about half the busy period waiting time by going at the quiet time in supermarkets and even less at post offices.

Table 3 shows how people feel about having to

Table 1

How often do you have to wait . . .

	at the checkout in a supermarket?	for service when you go to the post office?
	%	%
Always	18	20
Usually	43	27
Sometimes	36	40
Never	4	13
Base:	440	430

Table 2

How many minutes on average do you think people:

	queue at the checkout at...		wait for service in the PO...	
	quiet times?	busy times?	before or after lunch?	at lunch time?
	%	%	%	%
1-2 minutes	26	1	17	10
3-5 minutes	57	9	59	32
6-10 minutes	15	52	19	41
11-20 minutes	2	31	4	15
Over 20 minutes	1	8	1	2
Base:	433	431	405	399
Mean delay (minutes)	5.4	10.7	4.9	7.4

wait in supermarkets and post offices and Table 4 shows how shoppers attribute responsibility for these delays.

Table 3

How do you feel about having to...

	queue at the checkout in a supermarket?	wait for service in the post office?
	%	%
Don't mind	31	50
Dislike it	49	39
Strongly dislike it	20	11
Base	442	430

Table 4

Who do you think is responsible when you have to...

	queue at the checkout?	wait for service in the PO?
	%	%
No one	23	29
Yourself	2	1
Other shoppers	22	28
Checkout staff	4	11
Supermarket management	49	
PO Manager		15
PO Headquarters		13
The Government		5
Base:	433	421

We did not anticipate the evidence shown in Table 3 that a large proportion of the population did not mind waiting at the checkout or that this attitude to delay would be still more evident in respect of post offices. Despite the stereotype of the British as principled supporters of the queue it was a surprise that so many people seemed to accept waiting.

However other evidence slightly qualified this picture of the patient British consumer. Only 3% of respondents said that they preferred shopping at busy times and the most common dislike of busy times, cited by 43%, was having to queue; another 26% disliked the store being crowded and 22% disliked the extra time needed at busy periods. When asked to select two from seven unattractive features of post offices the dominant response cited by 83% of all respondents was having to wait for service. These data suggest that some of the people who say that they 'don't mind waiting' mean that they accept the discomfort of having to wait; they could still appreciate reductions in waiting time.

Of interest is the fact that virtually no respondents saw themselves to be responsible when they had to queue. People who go to retail outlets at peak time and find that they have to wait might reasonably blame themselves, particularly when they are prepared to blame other shoppers. The fact that they do not hold themselves responsible suggests that relatively few people see congestion as something that can be avoided.

Factors Associated With Dislike of Queuing

What differentiates the person who does not mind queuing from the person who does? This is an important question, partly because the person who dislikes delay is more likely to demand and appreciate improvements in service but also because these people are more likely to avoid congested periods.

Personality And Environmental Factors.

We first investigated whether the people who object to queues in supermarkets also dislike waiting in the post office. Such consistency could be based on personality, lifestyle or some quality of the environment that made the conditions in both store and post office similar. To test this we correlated the dislike of queuing with respect to supermarkets with the corresponding measure in respect of post offices. The Spearman correlation was .44, indicating some association that could be attributed to personality or to personal circumstances. We were surprised that this association was so low; it indicates that much of the dislike of queues is bound up in the distinctive features of the supermarket or post office or the differential use that customers give these facilities.

To investigate this issue further the data were cross-tabulated, comparing those who did not mind queuing (the queue tolerant, QT group) with those who did (the queue disliking, QD group) in respect of responses to other questionnaire items.

Table 5

Expectation of having to wait...

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never	Mean
	%	%	%	%	%
Supermarket					
Respondents who are:					
QT	14	31	40	32	31
QD	86	69	60	68	69
Base:	77	187	156	19	
Post Office					
Respondents who are:					
QT	15	32	71	74	50
QD	85	68	29	26	50
Base:	86	118	171	55	

Delay Frequency. A second association of queuing tolerance, indicated in Table 5, is that the

people who expect to wait more often also tend to dislike queuing more ($R=0.19$, supermarkets; $R=0.49$, post offices). This is not as obvious as it seems; people who wait frequently could become enured to delay and mind less but in practice they mind more.

The simplest explanation for this finding is that people who incur more delay at their usual supermarket learn to dislike queuing more. Since people do not expect to wait so long at the post office this may be one reason why people are more tolerant of delay there. An alternative explanation for the association is that it is due to perceptual distortion; i.e. that people who dislike queuing think they wait more often but actually do not. Feinberg and Smith (1989) illustrated such distortion when they showed that those who wait in queues judge themselves to have waited longer than the real delay.

Table 6
Attitude to Queuing by Employment Status

Supermarket	Employed %	Flexible %	Mean %
QT	27	34	30
QD	73	63	70
Base:	225	207	
Post Office			
QT	42	57	49
QD	58	43	51
Base:	223	202	

Demographic Associations

We tested whether there were any associations between demographic variables and dislike of queuing. Employment status, age and income were related. Table 6 shows the relationship with employment status. Employed persons (employed 8 hours or more) disliked queuing more often than flexible persons (employed less than 8 hours, housewives, retired and students) ($R=0.07$ supermarkets; $R=0.17$ post offices). The relationship between age and dislike of queuing is shown in Table 7; this effect appears to be related to retirement because toleration of delay rises sharply for the 65+ group. The association between income and dislike of queues ($R=0.11$

supermarkets; $R=0.18$ post offices) may also reflect the fact that retired people tend to be on lower incomes. One explanation for the difference in queuing tolerance between employed and flexible people is that the latter did have more time and were therefore less concerned about delays that used up that time; a second explanation is that employed people have to shop at more congested times and this affects their judgement of queuing.

Table 7
Attitude to Queuing by Age

Supermarket	Age: Under 45 %	45-64 %	65 plus %
QT	26	28	43
QD	74	72	57
Base:	172	153	104
Post Office			
QT	42	45	69
QD	58	55	31
Base:	169	149	103

Rewards And Costs In The Service Encounter

Another factor, associated with retirement, appeared in the post office analysis, see Table 8. Half of our respondents stated that their main reason for going to the post office was to receive pensions, allowances or other benefits. Benefit recipients were more likely to be queue tolerant ($R=0.21$) than those getting stamps, posting letters and parcels or paying for licenses. Although benefits are often the outcome of earlier contributions there is a gratuitous aspect to receiving them which may affect a person's attitude to the post office. An explanation for this effect can be found in the social psychology of exchange. Homans (1961) argues that human beings extend affection, respect, tolerance etc. to those who give them services, goods or forms of behavior that they value. Tolerating the queue in a post office is therefore a reciprocation for the benefit received.

This effect may also operate in supermarkets. We postulate that the more valuable the exchange with the supermarket the less people will mind waiting. Thus heavy buyers may tolerate the queue more than light buyers and implicitly this

thinking may be involved in the provision of express checkouts for those making small purchases. Factors that can add to the costs of queuing are staff inexperience, scanning faults and other causes of unexpected delay; by contrast cheerful service, conversation in the queue and assistance with packing may reduce the dislike of queuing. The evidence, given above, that expected frequency of waiting correlates with dislike can be seen in the same way; more frequent waiting adds to the cost of the service encounter

and this may be reflected in the attitude to queuing.

Perception Of Responsibility For Delay

One factor which was associated with dislike of queuing was the attribution of responsibility for delay. Those who dislike queuing blame the supermarket management or post office managements and Government much more than those who do not mind queuing (Table 9); the latter are more inclined to blame other customers or no one at all. This is a strong difference of thinking ($R=.34$ supermarkets; $R=.43$ post offices) which is of considerable interest and deserves further research; it could relate to quite general ways of seeing the world. One may speculate that the effect may be associated with Rotter's (1954) distinction between internal and external locus of control. Those who see themselves as in control of their own behavior will also see others as self-managing and will allocate responsibility to those in positions of authority, while those who see themselves as controlled by their environment will be more passive, either

Table 8
Attitude to Queuing by Type of Post Office Transaction

	Stamps, parcels, bills, licenses	Pension allowances, benefits
QT	42	61
QD	58	173
Base:	254	173

The fact that post offices give benefits to many of their customers is another reason why people are more tolerant of delay in post offices than in supermarkets. It also explains why frequent users of the post office are more tolerant (benefits usually involve frequent attendance) and why queue tolerance at the post office is greater among low income persons (who receive more benefits).

Table 9
Attitude to Queuing by Perceived Responsibility for Delay

	Supermarket Groups held responsible for delay:					
	No one	Self	Other Shoppers	Checkout Staff	Management	Base
QT	%35	2	33	5	25	134
QD	%18	2	18	4	59	297

	Post Office Groups held responsible for delay:					
	No one	Self	Other Customers	Counter Staff	PO Management/Govt	Base
QT	%40	2	38	7	13	206
QD	%18	1	19	14	49	213

Table 10
Correlations and Beta Weights of Factors Related to Queuing Dislike

	Multiple R	Adjusted R ²	R	β weight
Supermarkets	.49	.23		
Dislike of queuing in POs			.44	.35
Management held responsible			.34	.21
Frequency of waiting			.19	.12
Income			.11	ns
Employment			.07	ns
Post Office	.69	.47		
Frequency of waiting			.49	.37
Dislike of queuing in supermarkets			.44	.33
Management held responsible			.43	.26
Receiving benefits			.21	.12
Income			.18	ns
Employment			.17	ns

seeing no one as responsible or inclined to blame those who are the immediate instruments of their delay (other shoppers).

In a regression analysis 23% of queuing dislike could be explained by these factors in the case of supermarkets and 49% in the case of post offices (Table 10). The demographic variables do not have significant beta weights which indicates that their effect is mediated by the other measures of experience and belief.

Discussion

Dissatisfaction with service delay has had limited study. Previous work by Maister (1985) and East (1989) was analytical rather than empirical. The present study helps to flesh out the factors that are associated with dissatisfaction with delay and, in particular, it suggests that dislike of queuing increases with the expectation of being delayed and is greater when people identify management as responsible for the delay. Inevitably there is doubt about the direction of any causal process in a study of this sort and further work may clarify this matter. The fact that people dislike delay more when they expect it to be more frequent casts some doubt on the idea that people habituate to delay and cease to notice it when it is recurrent (as proposed in the Introduction).

The study also disclosed a wide variation in tolerance of queuing. Many people in Britain say that they do not mind waiting. Elsewhere we have investigated to see whether those who dislike waiting also avoid peak periods more than those who do not mind waiting (East, Lomax and Willson, 1991). We see this as an important possible consequence of service delay; if people voluntarily spread their demand from busy times to quiet times it may be worthwhile for the service provider to encourage this process and to provide appropriate information about times when the retail outlet is less busy.

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