

Beware: You May Lose a Month of Your Life to Contact Center Hold Times



Reading the mood of the modern consumer may be more of an art than a science, but in one respect, at least, customers leave no doubt about how they feel. Waiting on hold for customer service is driving people nuts.

And for good reason. If things don't change, the average consumer will be robbed of over *one month* of his or her life while waiting for contact center agents to pick up the phone.

You read that right. A [study](#) found that U.S. consumers on average spend about 13 hours a year, or 43 days in a lifetime, on hold. Not surprisingly, 58% said they were frustrated by hold times. In fact, in an [Accenture survey](#), consumers' top two complaints were having to contact customer service multiple times and being kept on hold for too long.

The Hold-Time Hall of Shame

For a real-time pulse of the customer experience, [OnHoldWith.com](#) compiles live consumer tweets containing the words “on hold with” and lists the companies receiving the most complaints. From a customer experience perspective, the result is a litany of horrors.

Consumers are reporting 45 minutes on hold with a national department store, 30 minutes stuck waiting for a large cable company, 53 minutes in Muzak purgatory with a cell phone provider. The magnitude of the problem is apparent by the speed at which the complaints scroll past.

The trends are not encouraging. [At the IRS](#), for example, only 43% of people who called this year were even able to get through to a human being—the lowest level in 10 years and down from 84% in 2005. Those who did get through in 2015 waited an average of 28 minutes.

Of course, that’s nothing compared to the experience of businessman Andrew Kahn, who said he waited [15 hours 40 minutes and one second](#) on hold with Qantas airline to confirm a flight before he abandoned hope and hung up. Or the eBay customer who [posted videos](#) of his marathon hold time that he said lasted more than 24 hours.

Airlines, mobile providers, and cable companies are among the top targets of complaints.

The Magic 1-Minute Mark

While the [average hold time](#) for companies of all sizes is about 56 seconds, it varies. Small businesses average 1 minute, 47 seconds; medium businesses average 39 seconds; large ones clock in at 45 seconds; and when calling a big enterprise call center you can expect to be on hold for about 52 seconds if all goes well.

These differences may seem small, but if you consider other [research](#) that estimates 15% of callers hang up after about 40 seconds of waiting, every second could be costing you a customer. Indeed, it’s been found that 34% of people who hang up will never call back.

One [survey](#) of 2,500 consumers found that 60% were not willing to wait more than one minute before they’d abandon a call.

The preferred wait time is, of course, zero minutes and zero seconds. So what can be done to get closer to that goal and handle customer issues more efficiently?

Four Ways to Tackle the Problem

1. **Address bottlenecks.** The best way to reduce wait times is for customers either not to have a need to call in the first place or to get through quickly to the right person empowered to solve their problem. To achieve that, you need to look at your holistic customer service experience. Optimize everything. Make sure information on your website is clear, ensure your call routing is working properly, manage customer expectations and train and authorize your staff to handle problems proactively.
2. **Improve self-service.** While about [80%](#) of inbound customer service interactions are by phone, [research by Steven van Belleghem](#) reported that 40% of those surveyed preferred

self-service over human contact. Millennials especially may prefer other channels such as live chat or social media. Upgrading self-service options may require you to reassess your technology, including your [IVR solutions](#).

3. **Crunch your data.** Analyze contact center metrics to discover when peak calling times occur. Analyze abandoned call data to discover if contact center hold times are causing customers to hang up. You can also program your systems to notify you when wait times reach a certain threshold so you can take action.
4. **Staff smart.** Intelligent call center workforce management can make all the difference. Be sure you have the right number of people on hand to cover peak periods, and figure out a fallback plan if you find out you are understaffed on a busy day. Explore a system that allows customers the option to receive a callback from the next available agent rather than waiting.

Curb Your Customers' Rage

Long hold times have huge financial implications. A [study](#) by Arizona State University found that 68% of households were experiencing “customer rage” over poor complaint handling, and, on average, each unhappy customer will tell 28 other people about their experience (and probably more, thanks to social media). Consumers reported themselves as more patient than these findings suggest. In an American Express survey, customers said they were willing to wait up to an average of [13 minutes](#) on hold. People must really love AmEx, but just because someone’s *willing* to do something doesn’t mean they want to—or should be forced to.

Do you have a call center success strategy or hold time horror story to share? Drop us a line on [Twitter](#). We’ll be waiting.