

Better Training - Shorter Lines!

By T. Scott Gross

Hourly employees have zero understanding of lines. That's no surprise. Neither do their supervisors. And yet, with a little training about how lines form and persist, customer service could get a lot faster!

There is no greater opportunity to offend a customer or treat a customer than a line. Customers usually hate lines but it doesn't have to be this way. When you understand the psychology of lines it's simple science to turn a line into a competitive advantage.

First you must recognize several facts about lines.

- * Lines are self-limiting.
- * Lines can form only when customers arrive faster than they are served.
- * Lines, once formed, persist indefinitely.
- * Once service is delayed for any reason, every subsequent customer will wait for the length of the original delay.
- * Lines are only as long as they appear.

Self-limiting

Lines are self-limiting. There is a point at which people will no longer join a line. That point is determined solely by the perceived value of what is at the end of the line compared with the value of the line member's time.

Let's say there is a line and at the end of this line are crisp \$1 bills. Each time you get to the head of the line, you receive a single bill. How long would you wait in this line? If you would wait for five minutes, you value your time at \$12 per hour. Would you wait an hour? And what if the reward was a crisp \$100 bill?

People will join lines that stretch for blocks to board a spectacular Disney ride or

attraction. They wouldn't normally join a similar line to purchase a hamburger. Obviously, many facts influence the perceived value of joining a line. How hungry you are for food or entertainment could have a dramatic impact on your willingness to wait.

Long Lines – Short Sales

In today's instant-gratification society, consumers are increasingly less inclined to wait. Businesses that can limit or eliminate lines have a distinct competitive advantage. If your line is long, your sales will be short.

In fact, long lines are definitely not a sign of prosperity, only of slow service. This is particularly true for businesses, such as restaurants, that experience heavy rush hours. Such businesses actually turn away customers, having lost the sales advantage of being prepared for the first wave of customers.

Lines can form only when customers arrive faster than they can be served. Think about it. If a customer comes in and is served before the next customer comes in, you cannot have a line. A line is possible only if a second customer arrives while the first customer is waiting for service or to complete the transaction.

Every time you see a line, you can be absolutely certain that at one time customers were arriving faster than they were being served.

Airlines and banks know about lines. Unfortunately, they don't know quite enough. They erect great, winding labyrinths of ropes and standards, and post

elaborate electronic signs announcing which agent or teller is available. Why? Because they add extra service only after a line begins to form.

If they have enough employees available to keep the line from growing, then they have enough available to have kept a line from forming in the first place. If only they had had the employees up front and ready to go before the line formed, there would have been no line. Think how that would sit with the competition!

Balancing the System

Lines, once formed, persist indefinitely. In the case of banks or airlines, notice that as long as management exactly balances the ability of the system to serve against the speed of arrival of new customers, the line will continue to persist forever. It cannot shrink because whenever a customer is served, a new customer takes her place. Whether the line is two or one hundred-and-two customers long, it will never change in size.

Lines take on a life of their own, and people stand shifting from foot to foot as living testimony to management's lack of preparation.

Once service is delayed for any reason, every subsequent customer will wait for the length of the original delay. If ever there was an argument for original sin, then this is it. Let's say the world is unfolding perfectly. Every sixty seconds, a new face walks in the door, makes a purchase, and turns to leave just in time to smile at the next customer. Now imagine what happens if you run out of merchandise and have to race to the stockroom, a round trip that takes two minutes.

Something is different, out of place, when you return to the sales floor. Now instead of one customer, there are two. Try as you might, you can only serve one customer per minute. Just as you bid one good afternoon, another customer steps into line behind the one waiting customer. You are doomed forever to face a line.

The interesting effect is that every subsequent customer must wait the two minutes you spent running to the stockroom. Theoretically this would continue forever, each customer paying in turn the price of your original sin.

There is more to learn about lines but passing on just these few key points will speed service and make serving customers fun.

T. Scott Gross is the author of *OUTRAGEOUS: Unforgettable Service, Guilt-free Selling* (AMACOM, 1998) Visit his website at tscottgross.com