'Subjective time' can improve your bottom line

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Time flies when you're having fun, but minutes can feel like hours in a dentist's waiting room. Our ideas of "time" are highly subjective and can depend on a stimulus — or the lack of one — in our environment.

Now Prof. Dan Zakay of the Department of Psychology at Tel Aviv University has empirical evidence to show businesses how to use waiting [time](#) to their best advantage. "Billions of dollars are at stake when customers are waiting, be it on the phone, at an Internet e-commerce site, or in a department store," he says. "If people feel they're waiting too long, they'll hang up or walk away and spend their [money](#) elsewhere."

His recent research, published in the journal *NeuroQuantology*, suggests that businesses can often keep those customers from leaving with a few simple strategies.

Manipulating the hands of time

For his study, Prof. Zakay asked his subjects to estimate and subjectively describe intervals of time. In the first group, 50 participants were placed in a waiting room with nothing to do, while in another participants were allowed to watch cartoons and TV as they waited the same amount of time. Those in the second group reported they had a much shorter wait — at least 50% less — than those who had nothing to do.

Over the years, Prof. Zakay has been measuring the difference between objective and subjective time through a battery of various cognitive experiments. There is a consistent difference in how we "feel" time, he says, and some of this basic understanding of the cognitive processes that measure time may prove to be a boon to business sales.

Time really is money

"When people are waiting in line, they have already committed to buying something, but because they don't like to wait, that commitment can change," Prof. Zakay explains. "The value of waiting, so to speak, is worth billions of dollars. Clients are easy to lose and hard to keep, especially when customers call in to buy something."

The question of how consumers "feel" time is very important to making the initial sale and turning them into repeat customers, says Prof. Zakay. His models can be used to manipulate people's perceptions so they feel they're waiting a shorter period of time.

Some methods seem obvious. At amusement parks, lines for rides and activities should never be straight; they should always be fragmented into different segments. The idea is to divide the line so that no one can see the whole length of the line, since seeing a long waiting queue is frustrating compared to seeing a short waiting segment. Of course in each segment other methods for distracting attention from time should be used, says Prof. Zakay: characters like Mickey Mouse are important for distracting children with a low threshold for boredom.

The same techniques can be leveraged for more traditional businesses. "There are very simple practices that can measurably boost sales," says Prof. Zakay. "For example, telling customers how long they can expect to wait always helps to reduce the feeling of wait time. Giving them coffee or interesting things to do can retain their loyalty as well."

"Essentially people want to feel that their time is valuable and that they're not wasting it in line," Prof. Zakay concludes. "When lines are designed well and waiting procedures are more enjoyable, the subjective waiting duration is decreased significantly," turning a long wait into a short one in the eyes of the customer.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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