



# Line, line, everywhere a line: Cultural considerations for waiting-line managers

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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** Given the trend of increasing business globalization, management teams of multinational companies have taken steps to better understand consumers, local business partners, and local governments. Local queueing preferences present managers with additional challenges and opportunities in international markets. The world may be ‘flat,’ but it is foolish to believe that all cultures perceive lines and waiting through the same lens. As discussed herein, perceptions regarding waiting and management of queues vary greatly; therefore, managers should adopt different policies and procedures when managing waiting lines across natural and cultural borders. Considering queue management in a global context offers benefits. Thinking globally—and acting locally—can prioritize and clarify important decisions any waiting-line manager has to make.

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## 1. How do the locals wait?

Imagine walking into an electronics store in search of a specific device. You seek assistance but no one is available; you become frustrated, your anxiety increasing by the minute. In contrast, imagine that as you walk in, a customer service agent greets you

promptly, listens to your needs, and tells you that someone will be with you shortly. This second scenario entails waiting, just like the first, but in it you are probably much more at ease and the time passes relatively quickly.

This raises a question for waiting-line managers who hold international responsibilities: To what extent does the management of customer expectations in queues provoke unique concerns for global business? It seems intuitive to assume that queueing behavior differs by region and culture; there may be anecdotal support for such a hunch, but queueing theorists have not systematically tested this hypothesis.

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To be fair, seeking an understanding of perceptual nuance can be considerably more challenging to quantify and justify than the efficient allocation of resources. Cultures are constantly interacting and evolving, so even the most rigorously obtained cultural data can quickly become outdated and irrelevant. And the technological advances that have made globalization more tangible arrived only relatively recently. Yet these factors should not deter us from considering cultural aspects of queue management, which may help clarify and prioritize a range of important supply chain decisions.

## 2. Conditions that make waiting seem longer anywhere

The queueing experience has tremendous influence over how a customer perceives a product or service. Maister (1985) established that the more a product or service is valued, the more tolerable any wait is likely to be. Conversely, patrons may show less patience for something that is perceived of lower worth. Waiting can lead customers to reconsider the extent of that value—and walk away. Maister listed the following conditions as positively correlated to the perception that a wait is of longer duration:

- Absence of engagement during pre-process waiting
- Uncertainty left unresolved over time
- Isolation
- Inactivity
- Unfairness/inequity (either real or perceived)

Enz (2010) raised another source of negative perceptions: physical discomfort. What these perceptual dimensions share is a potential to induce anxiety, which in turn is liable to spill over into a range of strong emotions either inherent in the circumstances or completely unrelated to the business interaction at hand. While client anxiety could be beyond a manager's control, factors that lead up to or exacerbate it may fall under his/her purview, enabling preemptive mitigation. This frees the manager to address matters more directly and, if necessary, with more nuance within a particular domain (Figure 1).

## 3. Factors influenced by queue design

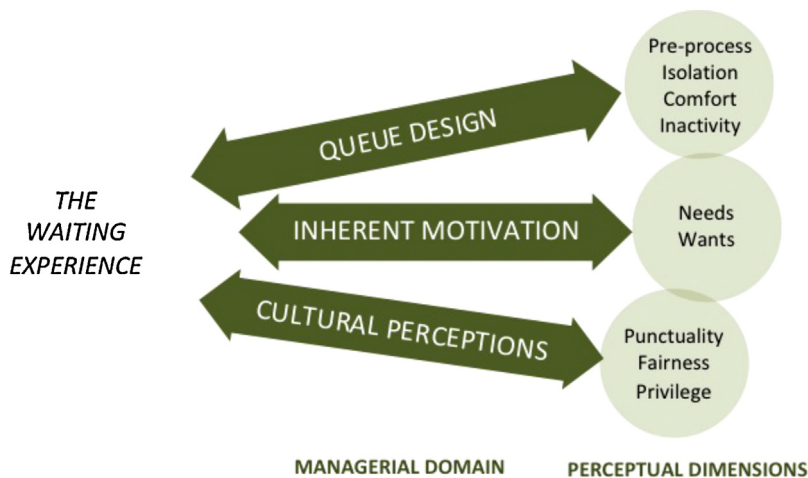
Queue design can predetermine the following:

- How promptly a customer is served
- Whether the customer waits alone or with others
- Whether a comfortable environment is provided
- Whether the customer is given a task to perform or has other tasks available

### 3.1. Pre-process

The time prior to being engaged by a company representative is known as the *pre-process wait*. It is, to some extent, a queue within a queue, experienced as a kind of ambiguous limbo before one has been formally acknowledged. As such, the pre-process wait feels longer than the in-process wait; anxiety arises when it is unclear if you are going to receive the service you are waiting for, or

Figure 1. Domains through which perceptual dimensions affect the waiting experience



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