the g-spot

Spending Other People's Time

Why how time feels matters more than how long it takes

By Gillian James

I am always happy to shamelessly jump on the latest bandwagon and so after watching the Odyssey, I too am exploring the lessons from ancient Greece. And, reader, there is indeed a powerful CX lesson for us. Ancient Greeks had two words for time. Chronos was clock time. The idea of time that we are most familiar with – quantitatively measurable and sequential. But what is more interesting is their concept of kairos. This ancient idea was more about how time was actually experienced and embraced the 'quality' of time and the idea of the 'right' moment. And I believe those ancient Greeks were spelling out one of the core issues with CX design.

> Organisations design, measure and plan experiences in chronos time but customers experience them in kairos time.

This paper will apparently take you 5 minutes to read but you might wish it would never end – hah. And of course, both are right.

In our modern times, the gap between chronos and kairos is wider than it's ever been because our collective patience is constantly being recalibrated. Twenty years ago, we thought nothing of waiting a week or even more for a parcel, now next day seems to be the bare minimum and we are being educated to expect things in hours.

Industry surveys tell the same story. Last year, a survey by queue management firm Waitwhile (who admittedly have an interest in the subject) found the share of consumers willing to wait fifteen minutes in a physical queue fell from 81 per cent to 75 per cent in a single year.

> **I think we can all acknowledge that patience is a depreciating asset. The question is whether organisations and their journey maps have planned for this.**

How time is experienced

Us CX practitioners love the story from Houston airport that's been around for a while. Passengers were complaining about waits at baggage claim, so the airport did the obvious thing and hired more handlers. Average waits fell to eight minutes, comfortably within industry benchmarks, and the complaints kept coming. (Honestly, some people are never happy!) Anyway, when the airport looked closer, it found passengers spent one minute walking to the carousel and seven minutes standing at it. And of course the punchline to the story is that the airport moved the arrival gates further away. The walk got six times longer, the standing around all but vanished, and the complaints stopped, even though the total journey time barely changed. (I'd like to think Odysseus would have cracked this immediately!)

Keep the customer occupied

It's accepted wisdom that occupied time feels shorter than unoccupied time, and by a long way. Richard Larson at MIT, who has spent an entire career studying queues (somebody has to), argues that the psychology of a wait usually matters more than the statistics of it, and research suggests people overestimate how long they have queued by around a third. It's why mirrors appeared beside lifts in post-war office blocks.

Organisations often underestimate very small signals that drive a sense of being occupied (or otherwise). My own particular bug bear is hold music. Anything that is looped emphasises duration where something like a radio channel or even a podcast does the opposite. A tiny change that produces an entirely different wait.

Or be visibly occupied yourself

> A customer's experience of a wait is tied up in emotions and 'fairness' and that's why I remind our clients of the importance of visible industriousness. People waiting want to see effort being made on their behalf.

A queue in front of a counter where team members are clearly grafting feels purposeful. The same queue in front of staff who are chatting, or nowhere to be seen, doesn't just drive dissatisfaction – it can, in some cases, drive visceral anger. Customers are remarkably forgiving of a wait they can see being worked on, and remarkably unforgiving of one that nobody appears to own.

It is why we tell every restaurant and pub we work with the same thing: prioritise the first drink. Take the order quickly, deliver it quickly, and almost everything else about the evening relaxes. Customers think: "Once I know they're on it, I will be more forgiving of almost any wait that follows." David Maister, who wrote the founding paper on the psychology of waiting, observed decades ago that waits feel far longer before service has started than once it is under way. The first drink (either literally or metaphorically) is the critical first step to get right and quickly.

Be careful what you promise

Then there is the promise. Working in outpatient clinics, we found that the more precise the appointment time, the lower the tolerance for delay. Patients told to arrive at 2.20 were noticeably less forgiving of a wait than patients booked in at 2.00. Precision reads as a promise, and by 2.26 you are in breach of that promise. What's interesting is that when interviewed, the patients didn't actually realise they had responded in that way. It was entirely subconscious.

Anyone who has watched an Uber sit at 'arriving in 4 minutes' for a stretch of time that is decidedly longer than 4 minutes knows the feeling. The app has made a precise promise and is breaking it in real time, right in front of you, with a confident little countdown. Disney plays the game the other way round. Posted queue times in its parks are deliberately generous, so guests routinely beat the estimate and step onto the ride feeling like winners. The research of Ziv Carmon and Daniel Kahneman explains why it works: our memory of an experience is shaped disproportionately by how it ends, so a wait that finishes better than expected gets remembered as a good wait.

From waiting to anticipating

A fascinating paper published in the Journal of Consumer Psychology this year distinguishes between two kinds of patience that most organisations treat as one. Decision patience is your willingness to choose a wait: you're at the point of checkout online and you very deliberately click past the £4.99 next-day option because five days is fine. Process patience is your ability to live through the wait you chose, and it turns out to be a separate faculty altogether. The rational customer makes the deal. An altogether more emotional customer has to stomach the wait but the two never agreed their strategy.

We see this most vividly in our work in the car sector. A customer specs their new car rationally, negotiates rationally (and after all, this is where the dollars and cents come in) and is told the honest lead time, to which they rationally agree. Then the wait they signed up for becomes unbearable. Nothing has gone wrong. The car is arriving exactly when promised. They just cannot bear not having it yet. The weeks and sometimes months pass agonisingly slowly.

The mistake is to treat the customer's rational consent as something that covers the whole journey. The reality is it expires almost the moment the waiting starts. But I believe that's exactly where the opportunity lies.

> **There is a subtle but important difference between waiting and anticipating. One is clearly negatively loaded, whilst the other is actually part of the enjoyment.**

For a process that takes as long as waiting for a new car, the real opportunity is to shift the moment of ownership. The car may be six weeks away, but the customer can watch their car, and by now it is very much **their** car, being loaded onto the ship, and follow its journey from there. Physical possession is still weeks off, but emotional possession has already begun, and an owner tracking their "baby" across an ocean is having a very different six weeks from a buyer wondering where their order is.

And if that anticipation option doesn't present itself in the same way, the other opportunity is to remind the customer of the benefit of their smart choice. "Your sofa is arriving as planned on Thursday. Well done, you saved £50 on delivery." It's subtle but it reminds the person doing the waiting why the person doing the choosing thought this was a good idea.

Progress, real or manufactured

It is well documented that one of the most important indicators of happiness for people is the idea of progress. Everyone is motivated by things getting better, that they are getting somewhere. Of course, this applies to the big things in life, but progress is appealing at every level. The pizza tracker and the little car inching across the map on your phone work because watching something move feels better than waiting for something to arrive. And just as anticipation can be manufactured, so can progress. Working in emergency departments, we often moved patients from one waiting area to another as they passed through the stages of their visit. The overall wait was no shorter. Satisfaction improved anyway, because each move felt like getting somewhere. A wait divided into visible stages feels shorter than the same wait spent staring at the same four walls. Customers will even tell you this themselves:

> in one survey last year, six in ten customers said they would willingly wait longer if they were given progress updates along the way and yet time and time again, we find team members uncomfortable with giving updates to customers unless there is definitive resolution.

How we talk about time matters

How you talk about time matters as much as how you manage it. I travel by train a lot, so I know first-hand that slight pit in your stomach when you hear those dreaded words "I'm sorry to announce that the train to London due on platform 3 is delayed by..." You can almost hear the collective intake of breath from all until the length of the delay is announced. But whether the delay is 3 minutes, 33 minutes or even longer, the announcement treats them identically, with the same faux-apologetic tone. And neither works. I am offended that I have had to 'waste' unnecessary stress over a delay that was arguably meaningless and equally for a longer delay, a tinned pre-recorded rote apology simply rubs salt into an already gaping wound.

I think too often organisations think about what to say when delays occur but less frequently, how to say it or how to minimise the emotional impact of it.

Faster is not always better

So, after all this you could be forgiven for concluding that the answer when it comes to time, is to do it quickly. But I'm afraid that could be a mistake. Because you see,

> time can signal respect, effort, and of course, quality.

Ryan Buell and Michael Norton at Harvard found that people rated travel search results as more valuable when the website visibly showed its work, listing the airlines it was checking as it searched. In fact, people were less confident and trusting of results that were 'instant' because maybe it implied less 'thought' had gone into it (even though they knew rationally this did not make sense). Travel sites like Kayak leaned into exactly this thinking, and the finding earned itself a name: the labour illusion. Domino's understood it too. Look closely at the pizza tracker and you will find a stage called the quality check. Whether your margherita receives a rigorous inspection I cannot promise, but the tracker converts a stretch of waiting into evidence of care.

The same instinct is resurfacing with AI. The more costly models actually take more time – once again aligning longer duration of time with better quality of output. An answer that lands in under a second is easy to dismiss as shallow, however good it turns out to be. If your service has genuinely done the thinking, it may pay to let the customer watch a little of it happen.

Should premium mean more time?

Which brings me to the most expensive misunderstanding of the lot. When brands brief us on premium propositions, 'more time' is nearly always on the list, usually meaning longer consultations, unhurried appointments and a relationship manager with all the time in the world. The instinct is generous, and it is very often wrong, because

> **the customers at the top of your value ladder are usually the most time-poor people you serve.**

Research led by Ashley Whillans, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, surveyed more than 6,000 people across four countries and found that rising wealth brings a rising sense of time scarcity, a state the researchers call time famine. People who spend money on time-saving services report greater life satisfaction. The wealthy are already trying to buy time back, which makes handing them more of yours a strange sort of gift. The wealthier the customer, the more expensive their hour, and a long consultation is a bill they never agreed to pay.

We saw this first hand when an airline once asked us to help make their first-class check-in feel more luxurious, and the proposal on the table was seating. Comfortable chairs, the logic ran, would make the space feel like a lounge rather than a queue. Our insight work pointed the other way. To a first-class customer, a chair at check-in is a warning. A chair says: you may be here long enough to need one. These were customers who did not expect to wait at all, let alone settle in for it. The most luxurious thing that space could offer was no reason to sit down.

The question worth asking

So here is a thought for your next journey mapping session. Most journey maps record how long each step takes and ask where it can be shortened.

> **Try mapping tempo instead: mark every step in the journey as needing to be faster, needing to be slower, or needing to feel different.**

Some steps genuinely need pace. Some need patience. And plenty just need the time to mean something.

Chronos is easy to measure, and that is exactly why organisations spend so much energy managing it. Kairos is harder to see on a dashboard, but it is the version of time your customers take home with them. The job, for those of us who design customer experiences, is to worry less about how long things take and more about what the time means to the person spending it.

Take action by

- Auditing every wait in your customer journey and sorting it into occupied and unoccupied time, then asking what customers can see, hear and feel while they wait. Redesign the experience of waiting before you spend a penny shortening it.
- Treating every stated time as a contract. If your operation cannot reliably keep a precise promise, make a keepable one instead, and build in room to beat it.
- Building a tempo map of your journey, marking where the experience should speed up, where it should slow down, and where the time simply needs to mean more. For your most valuable customers, start from the assumption that the greatest gift is needing less of it.

If this has got you thinking about how to improve the way your customers spend time with you, we'd love to talk. [*hello@signal.cx*](mailto:hello@signal.cx)

That'll be all!