

The Value of Music Music and On-Hold Waiting Time



**A Study by Dr A.C. North, David J. Hargreaves, and Jennifer McKendrick
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Introduction

This is a summary of the report written and researched by Dr Adrian North, David Hargreaves and Jennifer McKendrick (1999) from the University of Leicester on behalf of the Performing Right Society (PRS) and Phonographic Performance Ltd (PPL).

The report details the effect that music on hold has on peoples waiting time.

It discusses:

- The relationship between how music affects time perception.
- The environment that music creates in relation to audience reaction.
- How appropriate the music's suitability is for the audience and their perception of it.

In summary the findings were conclusive:

- Callers who were exposed to the music stayed on hold 20% longer than the callers who were exposed to verbal messages.
- Callers related their image of the company to the on-hold recording.

The Theories

This research investigates the effect that music and spoken messages has on the duration that callers are prepared to wait on-hold.

There are three possible reasons why people are prepared to wait on-hold longer. These concern previous research on:

- The effects music has on **time perception**.
- The relationship between whether the on-hold recording is liked and the duration that the caller waits on hold (**The Mehrabian and Russell (1974) Model.**)
- Whether the music **fits** the expectation of the caller.

Time Perception

Does the amount of time you think you have been on hold, affect how long you stay on hold? If so, can music affect your ability to judge time? In a study carried out by Kellaris it is suggested that time estimates decreased when music that was not liked was played. (see Kellaris Altsech 1992; Kellaris and Kent, 1992; Kellaris and Mantel 1994).

People who think that they have not been waiting very long should be more likely to wait than people who think they have been waiting a long time. Therefore if

people have mental stimulus in the form of music it would suggest that it would affect their ability to judge time and therefore stay on-hold longer.

The Mehrabian and Russell Model

This research looks at what is termed the 'approach' and 'avoidance' behaviours. It deals with, the interaction between the pleasantness of the environment, the mental stimulus that is provided, and individual differences in responses to the environment. Liked environments are claimed to lead to approach behaviours and disliked environments are claimed to lead to avoidance behaviours. These behaviours have four aspects.

The extent to which people desire to:

- Stay in
- Explore
- Communicate with others
- Be more satisfied with a particular environment

The desire to stay on-hold seems intuitively to capture many aspects of these four behaviours.

Musical 'Fit'

A final potential means of explaining the effects of on-hold stimuli on waiting time concerns the notion of musical 'fit'. It states that people react in a certain way depending on their knowledge, experiences and background. For example, an earlier study (North, Hargreaves, and McKendrick, 1997) played French and German music beside a supermarket display of French and German wines. When French music was played French wines outsold German wines by five bottles to one, when German music was played, German wines outsold French wines by about two bottles to one.

The findings show that music can influence a listener's thought, which in turn influences their behaviour. This suggests that callers may wait on-hold for longer when they are exposed to stimulus that 'fit' the expectation of what they want to hear.

The Study

A small advertisement was placed in a local Leicestershire newspaper asking people to telephone a number and earn £5 for completing a short 5 minute questionnaire on attitudes. They were asked to call between 3pm and 9pm Wednesday to Friday during two consecutive weeks. They did not know this was the experiment. On being connected, all callers heard the following message:

'Hello. Thank you for phoning. I'm sorry but the line is busy at the moment. Please hold to leave your number, and we will call you back as soon as possible to ask you the questions in order for you to qualify for the £5.'

The callers were connected to one of three conditions:

1. The Beatles – These callers heard clips from three songs by the Beatles, 'Yesterday', 'Eleanor Rigby' and 'Hey Jude' which were played on a continuous loop.
2. Panpipes – These callers heard the same Beatles clips but played on Panpipes.
3. Messages – These callers heard the following spoken message repeated at 10 second intervals: 'I'm sorry, the line is busy. Please hold.'

The call was never answered, and it was terminated after 5 minutes. The amount of time taken to hang up was measured for each caller. The call was then returned with the number taken from the call monitoring unit. The caller was asked to estimate their waiting time, rate the image of the telephone service and the on-hold stimulus on five adjectival scales: upbeat, upmarket, aggressive, elegant, and peaceful; and to rate their liking for the on-hold stimulus and the extent to which it 'fitted' their expectations.

The Results

Callers waited for approximately 20% longer when the panpipe music was being played in relation to the spoken message. The study also showed that there was no difference between estimated waiting time of the on-hold music and the spoken message. This suggests that they knew how long they had been waiting but were happier to wait if there was music being played than not.

In relation to the corporate image that was portrayed to the callers, most of the callers believed panpipes to be the most 'up-market.' They were also thought of as the condition that most fitted as on-hold music. When the callers were asked their opinion of the telephone service, the 'message' was deemed to be the most aggressive, whilst the 'Beatles' was considered to be the most 'up-beat' and 'liked.' This suggests that a company should be aware of the message that their on-hold music is sending to their callers/customers. Is it in keeping with their corporate image? Are they delivering the right message? What do their customers think?

When we talk about 'fit' we are discussing what the callers think sounds closest to their understanding of on-hold music. Many people relate panpipe/classical music with on-hold music as this is their experience of it. This implies that until we change what is used as on-hold music the results will always be the same.

The Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that different on-hold telephone stimuli lead to different waiting times on the part of callers. Specifically, panpipe music led to longer waiting times than did a verbal message repeated every 10 seconds. There was no difference between the conditions in terms of callers' estimated on-hold time, which suggests that on-hold stimuli did not influence actual waiting time by distorting callers' time perception. Instead, the data indicates that callers wait for longer simply when they are presented with stimuli which they like or which 'fit' their expectations.

It also showed that on-hold telephone stimuli can be used to commercial benefit, by projecting corporate style and values. For example you can use pop music to show an up-beat, fashionable establishment. Different stimuli can have different effects on different people depending on many variables including their background, age and sex.

We also need to address the situation that if we are able to alter a caller's perception of on-hold music, would the 'fit' of the music change? Callers associate on-hold music with non-copyright, panpipe music. If we can change the callers' expectations of the music used, then we have the opportunity to use music to the benefit of the business. Playing not only what the caller wants to hear but music to suit the company's style, image and corporate message.

The varied results of the experiment highlight the fact that one type of music does not suit everyone. Businesses need to think carefully and aim their on-hold music at their specific markets and products, and even think about variables such as times of day.

If you would like to see a full copy of the report please contact PRS for Music Marketing on 020 7592 3718