How long hold times affect your customers' experience (and your bottom line)

What really happens when you put a customer on hold?
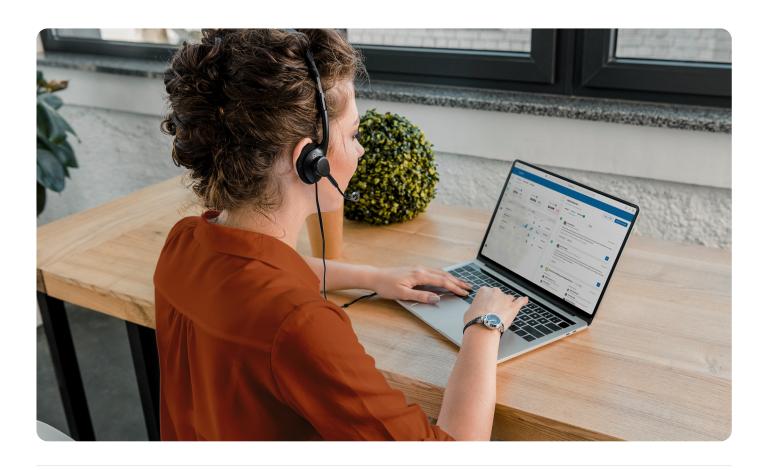
Introduction

If you're one of those businesses whose hold message includes a version of, "…we're expecting an unusually high volume of calls…" it's time to get real. Your customers lost patience in 2021. If you want to make that sale or earn that repeat customer, you need to take hold times seriously.

Hold times are a disruption. For customers, hold times can be an infuriating part of trying to contact a company, whether they want to have a simple question answered or a major issue resolved. For agents, hold times can be a stressful necessity that leads to friction-filled first impressions and customer annoyances that are hard to overcome.

That being said, hold times aren't going anywhere. There's always going to be an ebb and flow of contact center needs mitigated by asking customers to wait. Still, the question is, what does that mean for your business and how can you handle holds better?

AI-driven customer support

Wait a minute - what do hold times feel like from the customers' perspective?

71%

seconds is the average customer hold time.[1]

Shep Hyken, a customer experience expert and bestselling New York Times and Wall Street Journal author, has often thought about how to convey the feeling of being put on hold to the crowd at one of his many speaking events. Instead of relying on stats or stories, he says:
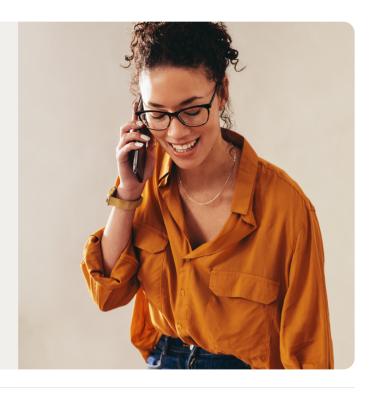
"I asked the VP of marketing to the stage in the middle of the speech to deliver a special message. He walked on stage to a nice round of applause. He took center stage and looked at the audience. Once the applause ended, he just stood there in silence, and that silence was, as they say, deafening. He continued to look out into the audience, not uttering a single word, for 90 seconds. The audience became very uncomfortable. I then came back on stage, thanked him, and I asked the audience to give him a round of applause as he walked off stage. The audience wasn't sure what had just happened.

I asked the audience how long he has been on stage. Many of them said three or four minutes. No, it was just 90 seconds."[1]

The impact of hitting hold.

Like it or not, agents putting customers on hold is part of working in a contact center. But when they do it, how often they do it, and how long your customers are left waiting matters—maybe even more than you think. Some of the consequences of keeping customers waiting can include:

- Increased negativity surrounding your brand
- Higher abandoned call rates
- Decreased likelihood of purchase
- More irritated customers

The impact of hitting hold: Red flags and opportunities

1 2 3 4

Risk: increased negativity surrounding your brand

43 days

The average person will spend 43 days of their life on hold.[2]

Opportunity

Patience is a virtue, but it's not a given. Wait time is a frustrating roadblock for consumers on their journey to getting questions answered or problems solved. And while at times a slight delay is unavoidable, when it does happen, it's important to make sure it's over as quickly as possible. The longer customers are made to wait, the greater the chances are that they will grow frustrated with your brand—sometimes so much that they spread that negativity when talking to peers or sharing on social media. Nine in ten Americans tell others about their customer service experience.[3]

Obviously, minimizing hold time should be the goal—but when you can't do that, it's important to ensure that your staff is trained to treat hold times with care and consideration to minimize customer frustration. Have an apologetic prompt at the ready and urge agents to answer the phones prepared to empathize and make up for lost time with prompt worth-the-wait service. After all, 35 percent of customers share negative feedback online, but 53 percent of customers share positive comments online.[3]

Risk: higher abandoned call rates

40%

When asked the top ways customers think customer service could improve, 40% of customers answered "take care of my needs more quickly."[3]

Opportunity

When customers are put on hold, there's no guarantee they will wait. Depending on how long your average handling time is, long hold times can lead to an increase in something no contact center wants: abandoned calls. The speed at which customer questions and concerns are handled consistently ranks as one of the most important factors from the customers' perspective. What's more, 57 percent of people report that they've been so frustrated with customer service that they've hung up the phone before coming to a resolution.[4]

Do whatever you can to waste as little of your customers' time as possible. Equip your workforce with integrated unified communications (UC) and contact center (CC) tools so agents can access specialist knowledge from subject matter experts. It's also time to take advantage of AI-powered functionality such as natural language processing (NLP), call summaries and sentiment analysis to give your agents immediate awareness of which customers need more attention to keep them engaged and retain them as customers.

Risk: Decreased likelihood of purchase

60%

of customers say they "changed their mind" about buying something when their attempt to purchase resulted in a poor customer experience.[4]

WThe bottom line is that hold times are annoying. The question is what do they actually mean for your business's bottom line? Although the answer isn't clear cut—every call, customer, and business model is different—one thing's for certain: putting customers on hold doesn't help sales, but it can hinder them. Consider the fact that many customers think being put on hold, especially for an extensive length of time, is poor customer service. And that 33 percent of customers say they would consider switching companies immediately after poor customer service. Beyond that, 60 percent of customers would consider switching after 2–3 instances of poor customer service.[3]

Opportunity

Pay close attention to hold times and how long it takes the average customer to get through. If you notice lengthy hold times are attributing to lost sales and falling customer satisfaction (CSAT), it's time to upgrade your customer engagement technology. Look for a platform that features smart automation to lighten your agents' administrative burden and free them up to handle more complex issues that need human cognition to get solved. You'll see your hold times fall and your CSAT soar.

1 2 3 **4**

Risk: more irritated customers

Happy customers equal happy agents. We know that no agent wants to pick up the line to realize there is an irate or extremely frustrated customer on the other end. It makes all aspects of their job, including identifying the customer, getting to the root of the issue, and providing the right information to solve their issue or claim, all that much harder. After all, it's difficult to make a complete comeback when customers have already been disappointed by a longer-than-expected hold time.

57%

of people find long hold times frustrating when calling a business.[5]
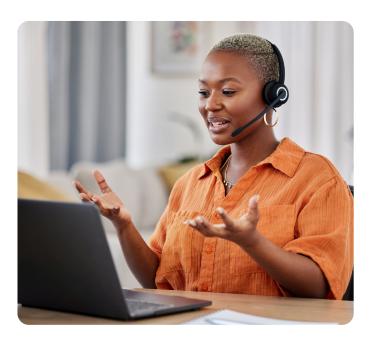
Opportunity

Make sure you're engaging customers on their channel of choice. Choose contact center software that brings all digital and voice channels into one unified interface that's easier and quicker for agents to manage. Adopt AI-powered automation that helps agents manage simultaneous interactions. Provide agents with virtual assistants that provide context to agents to help them resolve issues quicker.

Be proactive don't put the issue on hold

Hold times are sometimes going to happen. But how your business strategizes to reduce and improve the disruptions in customer service will determine your control over its impact on bottom lines and customer relationships. We've got some tips to help you tackle the issue, instead of simply accepting it.

Improve hold times through technology

The right technology can't take customers off hold for you, but it can help with the flow of the customer experience. Here are some tech-focused tips to consider when whittling down how long your customers spend waiting:

Provide a clear path to the right agent.

Sometimes customers have to jump through hoops to get in touch with the right person. Sometimes agents end up wasting valuable talk time redirecting customers. Where possible, add smart IVR functionality to make it as simple as possible for callers to get the right person on the phone.

Improve your self-service options.

If customers could help themselves wait less, don't you think they would want the option? Invest in conversational-AI based options to help handle simple information requests and save more difficult requests for agents. The more things customers can do on their own, the less time your agents will need to spend talking to them.

Make it easier for customers to speak to a live person.

A lot of times, customers are calling about things that can't be handled by technology. Streamline the process by making it obvious how they can connect to a live agent. Then, let customers know how long wait times really are.

Offer to engage customers on alternative channels.

Implement a call deflection strategy in which you offer the customer an alternative digital channel either before or during the call. This improves the customer experience by making it easier to manage a high volume of incoming calls and deflect a portion of those calls to more efficient digital channels.

Strategy suggestions

In delivering the best of the best customer service, technology is critical. But technology only goes so far without sound strategy to back it up. As you set up your contact center to better cater to customers and aim to reduce frustrations triggered by hold times, consider these suggestions:

Know your customers and how best to serve the.

Be proactive in managing customer engagement. Choose an integrated platform, like RingCentral, which consolidates your customers' preferred channels and has workforce scheduling functionality to help you plan optimal staffing. Look for ways to help your agents focus on the more cognition-heavy issues and work more efficiently, automating low-cognition tasks to save time.

Improve the agent experience to improve the customer experience.

Give your agents the tools and support they need to delight your customers. Invest in an integrated UC and CC platform like RingCentral, with an intuitive user interface that's easy to start using and connects agents on the front line to sources of knowledge in the rest of your organization. Look for modern functionality like AI agent assist coaching so agents can continuously improve on the job.

Create your best customer experience yet

Every agent has the potential to make impactful customer impressions that lead to lasting relationships and strong sales. Stop letting those opportunities for upsell and repeat revenue slip through your fingers – make life easier for your customers and your business.

Interested in learning how to effortlessly improve your customer experience? Schedule a demo to see exactly how RingCentral will get you there.

To learn more, visit the RingCentral website.

About RingCentral

RingCentral Inc. (NYSE: RNG) is a leading provider of AI-driven cloud business communications, contact center, video and hybrid event solutions. RingCentral empowers businesses with conversation intelligence, and unlocks rich customer and employee interactions to provide insights and improved business outcomes. With decades of expertise in reliable and secure cloud communications, RingCentral has earned the trust of millions of customers and thousands of partners worldwide. RingCentral is headquartered in Belmont, California, and has offices around the world.

For more information, please contact a sales representative. Visit ringcentral.com or call 855-774-2510.