

The Wait-Time Misery Index

Why Do Deliveries Trap You at Home For Hours; Strategies to Speed Things Up

By RAY A. SMITH

Would you wait around if your friend was four hours late for dinner? No, but your cable company thinks this is a reasonable window of time to wait for service.

Now some companies are whittling down the wait window to two hours and trying to improve communication with customers. Some send texts with arrival updates while others reveal online where people rank in the day's delivery queue. The thinking: people, trapped in the house waiting for something to be delivered or installed or repaired, will feel less powerless if they know what to expect.



Everyone hates waiting for the phone company to come connect service or for a mattress to be delivered. Ray Smith on Lunch Break looks at which companies are innovating in this area and what effect waiting has on our sanity.

More than 50% of adults used a sick day or vacation day to wait at home for a service or delivery, according to a 2011 survey of more than 1,000 people by TOA Technologies, a Beachwood, Ohio-based firm that works with companies to reduce customer wait times. More than 25% of people surveyed lost wages while waiting.

People often become more stressed by the uncertainty, says Richard Wurtman, a neuropharmacologist and distinguished professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "The underlying personality will determine the extent to which you are vulnerable to stress induced from waiting."

Shaving two hours is a big leap, companies say, because so many factors affect delivery from traffic to calculating the time a repair or installation will actually take.

General Electric began experimenting with moving from four-hour windows to two-hour windows last year for its appliance deliveries in the Midwest. UPS late last year launched a program called My Choice which, for a \$40 fee, offers customers a two-hour window delivery option. Use of the service has been strong, UPS says.

FreshDirect, a grocery-delivery service based in New York, offers two-hour wait windows. Less than a year ago, it began giving people \$2 discounts on its usual \$5.95 delivery fee to choose a "green" time slot—a window in which the company knows it has trucks in the customer's neighborhood. It is marketed as an eco-friendly innovation, but it also has the effect of grouping deliveries for more efficiency.

Linda Peterson, an interior designer from Atlanta, says she has resorted to paying more for an appliance-repair company called Appliance Doctor that guarantees two-hour windows, even though it costs at least 25% more, she says, than if she called the manufacturers of the appliances or other repair services.

"I didn't want to pay the premium, but I became so frustrated and being asked to wait for more than two hours was exasperating," she says. She finds even two hours hard to bear. In August, while waiting for a repairman, she began ironing linens to take her mind off the time. He arrived close to the end of the window and the work took awhile. "It was probably 50 napkins, four or five tablecloths easily," she says.

<p>2 HOURS</p>	<p>4 HOURS</p>
<p>Room & Board</p> <p>The furniture retailer has offered a two-hour delivery window since the end of 2010. People within 100 miles of its stores can choose their own delivery date, or opt to be scheduled to anywhere in Boston and Milwaukee this year. It uses advanced software that takes into account delivery routes and hardware assembly times.</p> 	<p>General Electric</p> <p>GE is experimenting with moving from four-hour to two-hour windows. It is developing a method to best customers a window 30 minutes before service begins to schedule its arrival. Currently, it calls customers.</p> 
<p>Crate & Barrel</p> <p>For an \$80 fee, customers can select a two-hour window for delivery, except in New York City, where traffic mandates a three-hour window. The furniture retailer offers Sunday delivery in major metro areas, including Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York.</p> 	<p>Verizon</p> <p>The phone company began moving from four-hour to two-hour windows in customer markets in 2010 and is expanding this to additional areas each quarter. The company first called customers to confirm appointments but people weren't picking up, according to a sales rep. So, this year, when Verizon calls, he asks GE with show "Verizon Install" or "Verizon Repair."</p> 
<p>FreshDirect</p> <p>The grocer markets its deliveries and if a truck is running late, it may delay additional shipments until it arrives.</p> 	<p>UPS</p> <p>As part of a premium service, since 2010, customers pay \$40 per year for a two-hour delivery window. An additional \$5 fee is charged when the package is delivered during the window.</p> 

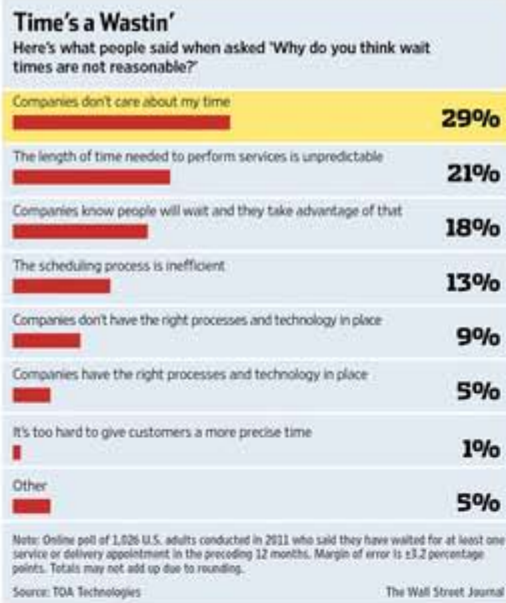


Illustration by Dan Picasso

Source: TOA Technologies

Calling during the wait window to inquire about the status of a shipment or delivery generally is not worth your time, companies say. That's because a customer will likely be calling the retailer, but usually the delivery is handled by a separate delivery company.

Service visits can be a different story. Bill Kula, a spokesman for Verizon, says usually that kind of inquiry wouldn't make a difference. That said, if a customer calls near the end of a promised window, perhaps 30 minutes before the time is up, it could be helpful. Verizon could see if there is a technician nearby who could reach the customer ahead of the scheduled technician, Mr. Kula says.

To make deliveries within a two-hour time slot, more companies are investing in software that helps determine the most efficient route. The technology can shave time off trips by taking into account speed limits, for example, and estimating how long a stop will take based on service type.

"In the not too distant future, companies will be able to tighten that window to one hour," says Satish Jindel, president of SJ Consulting Group, a Sewickley, Pa., transportation and logistics consulting firm.

"I see companies using the two-hour window as a significant marketing thing," says Bruce Champeau, Room & Board chief operating officer. The furniture retailer has had a two-hour window in effect since the mid-1990s. "It's a matter of respecting the customer's time," says Mr. Champeau.

Room & Board uses scheduling software that factors in variables from traffic routes, including roadwork detours, to how long furniture assembly might take. Employees make additional updates and adjustments accordingly.

A small delivery window can give a company a leg up on rivals. With the far and fervent reach of social media, a very good or very bad delivery experience can go viral. Increasingly shoppers are broadcasting their anger—and naming company names—on customer review sites like Yelp, and on Facebook and Twitter. In the TOA Technologies survey, 16% of respondents said they post complaints online.

When it comes to waiting, a maddening factor is often the lack of information. Is the company on its way? More companies are trying to give customers status reports during the appointment window. Some businesses believe this reduces customer stress.

This is what New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority found after it began installing digital clocks to display the number of minutes before the next subway train would arrive on the platform. So far, 209 of its 468 stations have the clocks.

"It's the 21st century," says MTA spokesman Kevin Ortiz. "There are expectations that real-time information be available to customers."

3PD Inc., of Marietta, Ga., which hires local carriers on behalf of large national retailers to handle the final leg—or what the industry calls "the last mile"—of a delivery, plans to add a similar style of communication for customers later this year. Using an app, 3PD's customers will be able to look up how far away a delivery is from arriving, says Will O'Shea, chief sales and marketing officer.

Some enterprising small concierge companies have emerged in recent years to do the waiting for you in your home for a fee. Some charge around \$35 an hour.

When Victoria Kingscott's cable went on the fritz, the 25-year-old senior analyst at a financial services firm in New York says Time Warner Cable told her she couldn't get a Saturday appointment for three weeks. She couldn't take off work during the week, so she booked a 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. appointment for a Saturday last August and waited. When the big day came, she waited some more.

At noon, she became antsy. She called and was assured a technician would arrive within the hour. At 1 p.m. she called again. Apologies were offered. "I said 'this is unacceptable. It's a Saturday. I have things to do.'" She was given a second four-hour appointment window and told she was "next."

More hours of waiting, more calls. At one point Ms. Kingscott was erroneously told the technician was at her home. He was not. Finally, the technician showed up around 4 p.m. "He didn't really say he was sorry or offer any kind of explanation," she says.

"Clearly that is not an optimal customer service experience," says Alex Dudley, a Time Warner Cable spokesman. "The overwhelming majority of our installations go well."