



# The Psychology of Telephone 'On Hold' Programming

by Dr. Jim Will

According to a survey conducted by USA Today, 52% of Americans became upset when being placed on hold. In light of these findings, it is imperative that business owners be aware of the implications their hold information has on their overall corporate image.

Recorded information and music on hold serves two basic functions: (1) lowering the incidence of caller hang-ups, and (2) acting as a "sales tool" to inform callers about products and services. These functions, along with optimal strategies, are addressed below.

## **Lowering the Incidence of Hang Ups**

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To a business, the worst possible outcome of an incoming phone call is a hang up (with resultant anger and frustration in the mind of the caller). Similarly, a poor outcome is achieved for the callers who do stay on the line but foster resentment and negative feelings (due to the ineffectiveness of the music and hold message).

A primary cause of caller discontent involves the concept of "perceived time" on hold. Obviously, this time perception should be kept to a minimum. It is proposed that, for a consumer, unoccupied time feels longer than occupied time (Maister, 1985). Likewise, unexplained waits seem longer than explained waits. If a surrounding (such as being "on hold") is unstructured, the experience will be more unpleasant than that encountered in a structured surrounding (Lewin, 1946).

Therefore, the most effective message hold program will both lower perceived time and provide structure to the holding period. Music selections have long been regarded as being effective in the lowering of perceived time. However, the proper choice of the specific type and length of music on hold selections is critical.

The primary function of music should be to keep callers involved and interested in the information provided. The music selections should be created differently in type and instrumentation to provide variety for callers "on hold." In addition, the possibility of a particular song evoking negative associations in the mind of the caller must be avoided. The optimal music on hold selections will thus utilize upbeat generic music that is unrecognizable to the caller (as opposed to using live radio broadcasts, well-know song, etc.). In this way, psychologically effective music selections are employed without the risk of compromise due to negative summary memory associations.

In order for properly selected music in an "on hold" program to be most effective, two additional factors should be addressed: the length of the music selections themselves, and the overall number of music selections contained in the program. As noted earlier, structured environments are more enjoyable or palatable than unstructured environments. A well-designed "message on hold" program should, therefore, provide as much structure as possible. This is most effectively accomplished by adjusting the music on hold selections to have relatively the same duration. In this manner, potential anxiety will be kept at a minimum because the structure is predictable and easily defined by the caller. Music on hold thereby, allowing the caller time to absorb more of the message on hold for the greatest recall.

The length of the overall message on hold program is also an important factor in reducing potential anxiety. In the area of marketing research, it is well known that excessive repetition in the advertisements is likely to produce "wearout" (the loss of overall effectiveness of the targeted stimulus). Because unsought repetition invites negative responses, it is desirable that the length of the "message on hold" program be maximized. If the on hold message program is too short and the information repeats itself frequently, caller anxiety is likely to be increased.

In summation, to best reduce anxiety (and subsequently lower the incidence of hang ups), the ideal "on hold advertising" program should incorporate the following:

1. Generic upbeat music on hold
2. Predictable, 30 second music on hold selections of varied types that terminate and tension release the caller
3. Longer, less-repetitive on hold message program formats

### **The Message On Hold Program as a Sales Tool**

Because callers process an inherent interest in a business dialogue, a well-designed "message on hold" program offers great potential as a sales tool. Within the context of overall anxiety-reducing function of the "on hold" program, verbal advertising information (inclusive of goodwill/public service announcements) provides a mechanism to transform a negative consequence (having the potential for additional sales/goodwill).

A sales presentation is most effective when subjects are involved and attentive. Higher levels of involvements tend to be associated with more elaborate and systematic processing of central (factual) information. Likewise, attention serves as an important "tuning mechanism" in the active selection information for additional processing (Bargh, 1982). A higher degree of involvement and

attentiveness present (since the initiative has been taken to call) will make a caller on hold especially amenable to well-conceived verbal messages.

A number of effective options are possible as selections of sales presentations. Callers will react to verbal messages in different ways (e.g., the "Need for Cognition (NFC) subjects enjoy effortful analytical activity (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982), while non-NFC subjects are stimulated by different advertising methods). As a result, the employment of a variety of message genres in an "on hold message" program (e.g. humor, trivia, public service, straight factual, etc.) will be optimal in increasing caller interest.

Because the cognitive process of subjects may be eroded by the presence of "interference" (Kerr, 1973), such as verbal information with the simultaneous application of background music, the ideal verbal information should be free of these effects. Such interference could divert attention or cause confusion for callers during the holding period.

To avoid "wearout", as mentioned in the previous section, the length of the message on hold program should be maximized in order to alleviate unsought repetition.

An additional variable is the rate of speed at which the verbal information is presented. Because faster rates have been shown to decrease attention and disrupt cognitive elaboration (Moore, Hausknecht and Thamodaran, 1986), verbal portions of the "on hold message" program should be of adequate length to avoid the "machine gunning" of information.

Ideally, verbal information should be adjusted to have relatively the same duration (in order to maintain the structured environment of the overall message on hold program). Structural integrity will be furthered if verbal information and music are employed in a predictable pattern throughout the on hold message program.

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In summation, an optimal "message on hold" program consisting of music on hold and verbal presentations should incorporate the following:

1. A variety of information genres to maximize caller interest and cognitive functions, placed in a structured manner.
2. Maintenance of longer message on hold program formats to minimize "wearout"
3. Upbeat and personable verbal information delivery
4. Information with no background music or interference.

## **References**

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