

Queuing Theory and Practice for Caterers

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Waiting in line is the single biggest source of consumer frustration, says New York retailing expert Paco Underhill. North Americans have a clock in their heads set to three minutes, and beyond that point frustration increases dramatically, said Underhill, who has researched shopping behaviour for more than 25 years.



Companies study how to get lineups moving, knowing that they're a major cause of consumer stress. (CBC)

Big companies study waiting times, but most — Loblaws, Air Canada, McDonalds — won't discuss their research. Tim Hortons vice-president Nick Javor takes queueing seriously, however, and is also willing to discuss it. Every element of service in the coffee chain is scrutinized to move people in and out more quickly.

Over the years, the company has questioned whether one line feeding several cashiers is better than a separate line in front of each. Javor said it isn't. But when customers reach the cashier, the transaction should go quickly. "Twenty to 25 seconds is the target to serve that coffee and a single item, a doughnut or a tea biscuit," he said.

The math of lineups

Queuing has its psychological aspects, but there's also a math element. Crunching the numbers helps **BBQ Catering** determine how many food stations are needed for no matter how many guests to be fed within 12 minutes. Twelve minutes is the time limit normally guaranteed by the company to its corporate clients for food service times.

For clients with narrow windows to feed very large groups the incentive is always there to experiment.

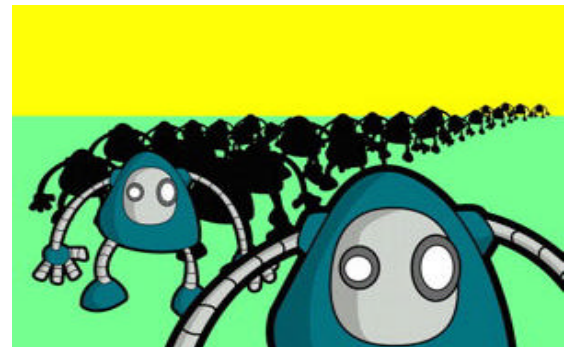
At first **BBQ** simply increased the number of buffet serving lines based on a ratio of serving lines to guest numbers. But, with experience, the techniques of line movement were refined. As guests approach a serving line their empty meal plate is handed to them. This dramatically reduces time spent fumbling for paper plates, in particular.

Guest choices on a food line are simplified by showing rather than telling. For example, when both hot dogs and burgers are available, the buns for both are held a few inches apart and the guest can simply point to the preferred item. The empty bun is then placed on the guest's plate and the next server simply fills the bun.

More than one chafing dish is used for the same food items that are expected to empty quickly on the serving line. When one is empty, the server simply switches to the second chafing dish while the refill crew replaces the empty dish.

Food items that are especially bulky, such as corn on the cob, are served from specially designed serving pans separate from the rest of the hot food. Salads, condiments, beverages and desserts are each served from their own areas, separated by enough space to permit crowds to flow freely between them.

It's always better to serve from 5 bowls filled with salad for 50 than 1 salad bowl for 250. Ketchup, mustard & relish are served from dozens of squeeze bottles. Salads and condiments require constant attention during a rush to keep their areas replenished & tidy.



Guests are not robots; lineups should always be short & fast moving.

It is customary for one guest to be served on each line every 9 seconds.

But it's not just about speed. Sometimes, lineups are inevitable. Keeping the queue calm was studied at Disneyland, and addressed by letting people know how long they could expect to wait. BBQ Catering anticipates the situation by placing greeters along the lineup to give advance notice of the menu & to direct guests to the fastest moving area.

Numerous large signs are used to direct guests to specialty items such as dishes for vegetarians.

Staging guest arrival at the serving areas so that not all guests arrive at the same time is always useful. Hors d' oeuvres slow the rush to the main food items, especially when coupled with cocktail tables so that guests can socialize while waiting.