

On Hold And In Hell

Inside the young science of keeping callers on the line. Damn you, Erik Satie.

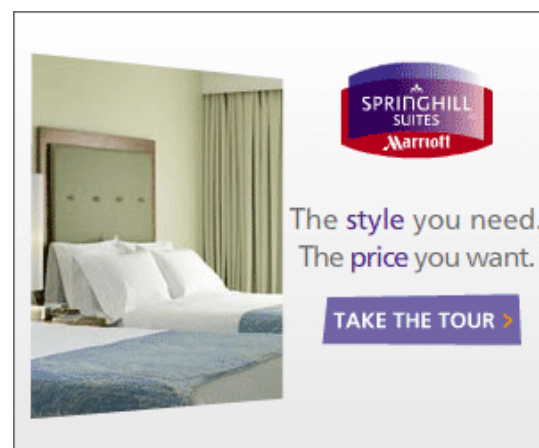
By **Russ Juskalian** | Newsweek Web Exclusive

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Of all the depressing statistics about a lifetime of consumer existence, this may be the most distressing: each of us is destined to spend roughly 1.2 years on hold. Yes, you read that correctly. More than a year of your life will be spent on the phone listening to Muzak stations like Aura ("Taking the primarily instrumental musical form to experimental and inspirational places"), Moodscapes ("Airy and relaxing"), and Tropical Breezes ("Those carefree days of sun, fun, and frozen cocktails") while being serially apologized to by robotic voices better calibrated to taunt than sympathize.

As you might have feared, there's nothing random about this common, near-death experience. Modern corporations, with the help of psychologists, have actually made a science out of keeping you on the line, using harmonic soporifics in an effort to subdue your rage. They want you to enjoy the experience—or at least hate it less—in the hope that you will buy what they are selling when you finally get the chance. But where did the idea that music could be a tonic to calm angry consumers come from? What makes us happier: silence, music, or estimated wait times? And does the practice of interrupting hold music every 30 seconds with a message apologizing for, well, keeping you on hold, make the situation any better?

Simon Morrison, a musicologist at Princeton University, says that we can thank a French composer named Erik Satie for the birth of background music. Satie is best known for his three-piece *Gymnopédies* (piece No. 1 is the instantly recognizable theme to the 2008 documentary film *Man on Wire*), but starting in 1917, he also wrote a number of compositions he referred to as "furniture music." "Playing in the background of bordellos where no one was listening," says Morrison, "[Satie] developed a very cynical attitude toward the listener." Satie was so obsessed with the idea that music could no longer communicate to the audience, he concluded that music in the 20th century was destined to be a vacuous, comfortable



apparatus best used as a background for other activities, much like a favorite chair.

Though it hardly seems possible that the Muzak (the term is often used generically, but Muzak Holdings LLC is a real company) pumped into malls could actually influence shoppers, the truth is, alas, that it does. James Kellaris, a marketing professor at the University of Cincinnati, says that music can have an impact on a wide array of customers' behaviors, changing their perception of time, conditioning them to associate a song with a brand, or limiting their ability to critically analyze a potential purchase due to musical distraction. "When shoppers are exposed to music in a store, sales resistance decreases," he says via e-mail. Our brains have a finite bandwidth for taking in and processing information, and clogging that bandwidth with music is sometimes enough to prevent us from making rational purchasing decisions, or worrying about the time.

An easy-listening version of "Rock and Roll All Nite" might lower your barrier to spending \$30 on gimmicky boxers, but not all music alleviates the frustrating experience of waiting on hold. Kellaris says that while musical distraction often causes time to feel like it's passing more quickly, particularly dull, or overly familiar, music can actually make the wait feel longer. Familiar music may act as a sort of "Zip file," says Kellaris, referring to the common format computers use to compress large volumes of data into a smaller package. "If you hear an excerpt of a familiar piece of music, it might cue recall of the entire piece." Kellaris also cautions that numerous factors, including mindset and setting—and in one of his studies, even gender—determine the effect that background music has on us. "Time on hold seemed shortest for women exposed to alternative rock and for men exposed to classical music," he says.

Anat Rafaeli, a professor at the Israel Institute of Technology, and her former graduate students Nina Munichor and Liad Weiss have looked specifically into what keeps us on the line—and happy—when we're on hold. In a paper Munichor and Rafaeli published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, the two compared hold music, estimated wait times, and recorded apologies for their effectiveness. In the first of two experiments, Munichor and Rafaeli found that callers who were given information about their place in line reported more positive experiences—and hung up less frequently—than those who were played background music. And as for recorded apologies? They can make the situation worse, said Rafaeli. Given that apologies often interrupt background music without providing any useful information, she suggested it is possible that "you sort of drift into the music, and go with the flow, and forget that you're really waiting, or wasting your time. But then this apology awakens you to this unpleasant effect that, hey, I'm waiting!"

In the second experiment, Munichor and Rafaeli found that the feeling of progressing toward the front of the line, rather than the perception of a short wait, improved caller reactions the most. Rafaeli said that it doesn't generally matter whether a caller is given an actual estimate of the time left to wait, or the less useful statistic about the caller's place in line (knowing your place in line doesn't tell you much, since being second could mean waiting three or 30 minutes), since both work equally well. We just need to be convinced

that the line isn't too long, and that we're moving toward the front.

Another surprising finding, said Rafaeli, is that interactive voice response (IVR) systems—the automated phone menus one moves through by pressing buttons—can actually assuage our on-hold rage more effectively than music. Again, the most important thing is the perception of moving toward a goal. "People like to complain about these IVRs," said Rafaeli, "but usually, I think, the complaints are because the systems are too long and too complicated." It's a fairly unsophisticated aspect of our psychology that the illusion of progress is enough to keep us on the line. As psychologists—and corporations—learn better how to exploit our susceptibility to such simple cues, we may find ourselves subject to longer, more frequent sessions waiting on hold.

All of which raises some disturbing possibilities. Would it be ethical for a company to lie to you about your position in line if it made you feel better and promoted commerce by exposing you to a sales pitch, say, for cheap appetizers when you call the local pizza-delivery joint? What about charging you a fee to jump to the head of the line ("pay to not wait" schemes)? The answers are not entirely clear, in part because the science of being on hold is still young and its ethical concerns largely unexplored.

What is clear, of course, is that each day we grow more accustomed to life on hold. By the time intelligent robots rise up and become our overlords, they probably won't have to subjugate us, Terminator style—they'll simply lull us into servitude with NuJazz ("A hip and sophisticated program for the downtown lifestyle") and pitch-perfect estimates of our place in the queue. Perhaps then we'll yearn for the good old days, when, at the very least, we got an apology for the inconvenience.

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