

Shoppers in the UK have an average wait time of two and a half minutes. In the UK, 10.2 per cent of queues contained customers that appeared dissatisfied, while the number of dissatisfied shoppers nearly trebled at traditional retail stores in Croatia, Germany and Sweden.

Queuing can also have more serious consequences as 'queue rage' sets in – a phenomenon that affects 65 per cent of UK shoppers, according to research carried out by Aspect Market Research for QM Group in December.

About 34 per cent of those surveyed said they had lost their temper and shouted abuse while waiting in a queue. In some instances such queue rage can turn physical, especially when queue jumpers are involved – an irritant for 67 per cent of customers, according to QM Group.

One of the most stark illustrations of this was at the opening of Ikea's Edmonton store in February, when one person jumping the queue for cut-price sofas started a riot among customers waiting for the store to open.

At some retailers, queuing is inevitable. Ikea is notorious for the queues that build in its stores as the retailer struggles to meet UK demand for its product through a limited number of outlets. However, it is now making customer waiting times a key performance indicator.

"Historically, we just accepted we have been overshopped," says Ikea UK services manager Andrew North. However, in the past two years Ikea has commissioned detailed twice-yearly surveys into in-store customer service, enabling it to draw up waiting time targets throughout the store – including at the till and returns desk. As a result, individual stores will soon each have to report on waiting times as part of meeting their customer promise.

North says Ikea's strategies for handling queues vary according to the store. "In Ikea Cardiff, all the staff are multi-skilled so they can go on tills when needed," he says. The retailer has also followed the lead of stores such as Woolworths by introducing queue busters – staff that can pre-scan goods before shoppers reach the till – into some stores. These are also useful at particularly busy times of the year, such as Christmas and during Sales.

However, this strategy is not necessarily the best option, according to PA Consulting Group consultant Alastair Charatan. "These are inappropriate in many retailers – such as supermarkets – because of the physical basket size. And if you can get the people to man a mobile till, on the whole it's better to put them behind a fixed one," he says.

Queues can also be handled by directing queuing customers to the nearest available till. At Ikea, this is done manually by checkout supervisors, who point customers towards the fastest-moving lines.

In the returns department, Ikea takes its cue from retailers that have



TV times: Hamleys' queue system uses screens to stop young shoppers becoming bored

## "HISTORICALLY, WE JUST ACCEPTED WE HAVE BEEN OVERSHOPPED"

ANDREW NORTH  
IKEA

particularly busy peak-time queues, such as Boots, Sainsbury's and M&S, and has installed audio-based call forwarding systems to direct shoppers to the next available cashier, a solution that has filtered into retail stores from post offices and banks and was launched initially by QM Group.

A similar system is in place at Marks & Spencer to handle peak trading at a number of its stores, including its Simply Food outlet at London's Waterloo station. "Waterloo is an extremely busy station with 74 million visitors a year. In order to deal quickly and efficiently with our customers, we have a system where customers form a single queue and are called to the next available till by a recorded voice," says an M&S spokeswoman. "All 10 tills are open during busy periods and the maximum waiting time is no more than three minutes."

However, few retailers personalise the announcements to their store, even though the capability is there and, in not doing so, fail to make

their stores stand out from banking-type environments. North says his stores would like to personalise the announcements, but says the first stage is getting such systems into stores and explains that in outlets such as Warrington, this is accompanied by plasma screens that "soften" the message with added value content.

Toy retailer Hamleys has adopted this tactic at its Regent Street store in London since Christmas. Its digital voice call forwarding messages have been personalised to use children's voices to suit the store, accompanied by screens displaying video content that keeps young customers amused, rather than bored, frustrated and ignored.

QM Group head of media application Gavin Anderson says: "The retailer has the opportunity to make the customer feel loved. A queuing experience should add value, but at the moment most retailers don't understand that."

For retailers, the key to combating queues is being seen to do something or giving customers something to do – whether in the form of further product displays (which can also increase impulse sales) or video content that keeps them amused, but is not used to sell. Having extra systems in place can help, but it is futile if stores don't make the best use of their available resources.

For example, QM Group's research showed that slow, chatting till staff irritated 68 per cent of customers, while 49 per cent of respondents said closed tills in busy stores were particularly annoying.

### LAYING IT ON THE LINE

Queue management can be simply about going back to the basics of store layout and staff location – helped by improvements in staff scheduling technology – to compare trade history and predict future demands. "We are seeing a big trend towards getting staff allocation right to reduce queues," says Simon Macpherson, operations director at Kronos Systems, which produces such solutions. "Not only is it handling queues, it's also making sure people are in the stores and departments as needed," he says.

Charatan says the basic strategy of diverting staff from lower-priority tasks can have a big impact on customer satisfaction. "It's very annoying for customers standing in a queue seeing an inactive till and staff doing other tasks," he says. "If shoppers see that the store is doing what it can do to reduce the queue, they are more willing to wait."

North says: "We can do things like give sweets out to kids in the queue, but we've almost failed then if we have to do that. As long as customers can see you are doing everything you can, they are happy."

The better-managed the queues are, the more the tills will be ringing. "The service levels of your business are directly linked to profitability," says Anderson. "If you leave your customers with a good feeling about you, they are more likely to come back." **RW**

### WHY KEEP YOUR QUEUES IN CHECK?

- Queuing to pay is often the last thing a customer does before leaving. This can leave them frustrated with a negative impression, making them less likely to return
- Staff dealing with customers that have been well treated – and therefore aren't stressed at having queued – will be less stressed themselves, increasing job satisfaction because they are not having to deal with rude, frustrated shoppers
- Staff can serve more customers per hour if those customers are directed to each till point effectively, thereby increasing sales as a result
- People waiting in an ordered line are often likely to pick up impulse purchases, because they have the time to look at items they wouldn't normally notice
- Customers expect to be treated fairly. Managing queues shows them that you value them and their time

Source: QM Group