

Nearly all of us know what it's like to be put on 'musical hold'. Call almost any customer service number, and you can expect to hear at least a few bars of boring elevator music before an operator picks up. The question is: do you hang up or do you keep holding? That may depend on your gender and what type of music is playing, according to research reported by University of Cincinnati Associate Professor of Marketing, James Kellaris.

Kellaris, who has studied the effects of music on consumers for more than 12 years, teamed with Sigma Research Management Group to evaluate the effects of 'hold music' for a company that operates a customer service line.

The researchers tested four types of 'on-hold' music with 71 of the company's clients, 30 of them women. Light jazz, classical, rock and the company's current format of adult alternative (a mix of contemporary styles) were all tested. The sample included individual consumers, small business and large business segments. Participants were asked to imagine calling a customer assistance line and being placed on hold. They were then exposed to 'on-hold' music via headsets and asked to estimate how long it played. Their reactions and comments were also solicited and quantified by the researchers.

Service providers, of course don't want you to have to wait on hold, but if you do, they want it to be a pleasant experience for you. But Kellaris' conclusions may hold some distressing news for companies. No matter what music was played, the time spent 'on hold' was generally overestimated. The actual wait in the study was 6 minutes, but the average estimate was 7 minutes and 6 seconds.

He did find some good news for the client who hired him. The kind of music they're playing now, alternative, is probably their best choice. Two things made it a good choice. First, it did not produce significantly more positive or negative reactions in people. Second, males and females were less polarised in their reactions to this type of music.

Kellaris' other findings, however, make the state of musical hold a little less firm: time spent 'on hold' seemed slightly shorter when light jazz was played, but the effect of music format differed for men and women. Among the males, the wait seemed shortest when classical music was played. Among the females, the wait seemed longest when classical music was played. This may be related to differences in attention levels and musical preferences.

In general, classical music evoked the most positive reactions among males; light jazz evoked the most positive reactions (and shortest waiting time estimates) among females. Rock was the least preferred across both gender groups and produced the longest waiting time estimates. 'The rock music's driving beat kind of aggravates people calling customer assistance with a problem,' said Kellaris. 'The more positive the reaction to the music, the shorter the waiting time seemed to be. So maybe time does tend to fly when you're having fun, even if you're on musical hold,' Kellaris joked.

But unfortunately for companies operating on-hold lines, men and women have different ideas about what music is 'fun'. 'The possible solution,' Kellaris joked, 'might be for the recorded message to say: if you're a male, please press one; if you're a female, please press two. If you are in a bad mood, please hang up and try later.'