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CRANKY CONSUMER**Waiting for Customer Service**

By **SAM SCHECHNER**
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One of the quickest ways for a company to alienate its customers is to force them to burn a chunk of their evening waiting to talk to a customer-service representative.

As companies pour more money into automating their help lines, wait times aren't getting any shorter. And while the labyrinthine menu options may ease the burden on the sparsely staffed call centers, it can add a new layer of hassle for customers just looking for an answer to a simple question.

The average time spent slogging through automated systems and waiting on hold is 122 seconds, according to the Incoming Calls Management Institute, a consulting firm. That is up 33% from five years ago. On the average help line, more than 15% of callers will wait more than two minutes on hold, it says.

To gauge wait times, we dialed the customer-service desks at five large companies, including a cable company and a health insurer, at different times of the day: morning, lunchtime and after work. Among the companies we called were a telecommunications company, generally among the more speedy to answer the phones, according to the institute, and a software support line, usually among the slowest.

CAN I HELP YOU?

See how the customer-service call centers
[stacked up](#)⁰

Call centers, much like commuter highways, have busier times of the day, week or even year, when they sometimes are overwhelmed by traffic. And there are random events that can affect a call center's response time, too. When stock markets are more volatile, for example, brokerage houses' lines can get


swamped.

The longest we had to wait was when we called a cable company. It took almost 15 minutes to reach someone at Time Warner Cable, a unit of **Time Warner** Inc., when we called in the morning. Things were better at lunchtime -- a rep answered our call in 32 seconds. But the company's computer system was down and the reps weren't able to help customers. After 5 p.m., we kept getting a busy signal. Frustrated, we dialed a service number outside of our area code and got through to a rep -- after a four minute and 14 second wait. Time Warner Cable said its standard is to answer 90% of its calls in 30 seconds or less. The company also said it is in the process of hiring more customer-service reps in New York City.

In many cases, though, we got a quick response.

When we called about our Citibank credit card in the morning, we were on hold for only 10 seconds. At noon, we spent 51 seconds waiting. That stretched to almost two minutes after 5 p.m. On our first call, we bounced around the voice-prompt menu for three minutes, until we found we could say "5" to get to a person. The company's average wait time for customer service is usually 12 to 15 seconds, says Elizabeth

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Fogarty, a vice president for **Citigroup**. The busiest times are between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m. Eastern time, she says.

We never had to wait more than 1:18 for a rep at **Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield**, the Blue Cross licensee in eastern and southeastern New York state. Most people will tolerate longer waits for health insurers, according to Tarp, a customer-service consulting company. Empire said its goal is to answer calls within 30 seconds, adding that its phone service scores highly in its customer surveys.

Once we maneuvered through Cingular Wireless' voice-recognition system, which took more than a minute and a half, we never had to wait more than 17 seconds for an answer. The company said that after its acquisition of AT&T Wireless was approved last fall, it hired 4,000 reps. (**SBC Communications Inc.** is the majority owner of Cingular.)

Only **Microsoft Corp.** did as well, offering a rare option that got us to a rep right off the bat. After the system finished a spiel about having our "product key" ready, it took only around 10 seconds to get connected to a person. The average call queue in a software support line stretches to two minutes -- and that's after a minute getting in line for a person to pick up, the Incoming Calls Management Institute says.

The drawback with Microsoft: As with many technology companies these days, there sometimes is a charge for additional help requests. Matt Fingerhut, director of consumer tech support, says the "primary goal" is to resolve a customer's technical issues on their first call.

• Write to cranky@wsj.com¹.

* * *

COMPANY: Microsoft, (425) 635-3311

HOW LONG IT TOOK: 0:08 to 0:18 seconds

HOW LONG IT FELT: Instant

UPSIDE: So fast there was no time to listen to hold music.

DOWNSIDE: There may be a charge for some help requests.

* * *

COMPANY: Cingular Wireless (866) 293-4634

HOW LONG IT TOOK: 0:07 to 0:17

HOW LONG IT FELT: Crazy fast

UPSIDE: Voice recognition freed us from the button-pushing of touch-tone systems.

DOWNSIDE: Having to enter a lot of info in the system, only to have a representative request it again.

* * *

COMPANY: Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, (800) 453-0113

HOW LONG IT TOOK: 0:21 to 1:18

HOW LONG IT FELT: Surprisingly quick

UPSIDE: Jazz music helps pass the time.

DOWNSIDE: We were five minutes into the automated system before we found pressing "0" got us to a person.

* * *

COMPANY: Citibank, (800) 950-5114

HOW LONG IT TOOK: 0:10 to 1:58

HOW LONG IT FELT: Not so long

UPSIDE: Our morning call went straight through with almost no wait.

DOWNSIDE: We were subjected to a bouncy, jazz-substitute -- the aural equivalent of Velveeta.

* * *

COMPANY: Time Warner Cable, (718) 358-0900

HOW LONG IT TOOK: 0:32 to 15:21

HOW LONG IT FELT: Endless

UPSIDE: We learned that busy signals still do exist.

DOWNSIDE: We got through quickly one time -- when the computer system was down.

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