

The BIAS project applies tools from behavioral science to improve the well-being of low-income children, adults, and families.

behavioral buzz

Brought to you by the BIAS team | March 2013



Welcome!

This is an email blast about **behavioral economics** and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families' **Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS)** project. The BIAS project adapts and applies tools from behavioral science to improve the well-being of low-income children, adults, and families.



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Behavioral Insight

Want to help clients be more content while waiting?

We have all had the experience of waiting for service, sometimes for long periods. One study found that people would rather clean their toilets, sit in traffic, or go to the dentist than wait in line.^[i] However, organizations often do not have the resources to serve clients as quickly as they would like. When this is the case, it may be useful for organizations instead to manage the perception of wait time.^[ii]

A body of work suggests ways to mitigate the negative effects of waiting. For example, an airline in Texas addressed customer complaints about time spent waiting for checked baggage by increasing the amount of walking time it took to reach the baggage carousel. Complaints dropped dramatically, largely due to changed perception of the wait time.^[iii] The change was very inexpensive to implement relative to alternatives that involved hiring more personnel or speedier equipment.

There are several ways that social service practitioners can incorporate research insights about waiting in similarly cost-effective ways.^[iv] First, if a client knows his or her place in the "queue," first-come, first-served is often viewed as fair and people are generally willing to wait longer.^[v] This can be implemented by having a single line (multi-line set-ups, where lines move at different rates, often cause discontent since the "other" line always seems to move faster). Second, eliminating "empty" time can improve the perception of how long a client has been waiting.^[vi] Amusement parks have long incorporated this idea

by having entertainment available for customers waiting for rides. Having clients complete paperwork or other items while waiting can help occupy time as well as create the perception that service has already begun. Finally, it may be helpful to provide information on the expected length of the wait to help clients limit uncertainty and better manage their expectations.

Accomplishments

Behavioral Diagnosis: Increasing Willingness to Wait

Over the past several months, the BIAS team has been working with the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) to understand how insights from behavioral economics can be used to minimize the number of callers who hang-up prior to reaching an advocate (an NDVH staffer).^[vii] Our work has focused on the outgoing message that callers hear while they are waiting for an advocate to become available. At present, callers hear this message:

Hi. You've reached the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Currently advocates are responding to other calls. If this is an emergency, please hang up and call your local 911 or remain on hold and your call will be answered by the next available advocate. [Repeats in Spanish]

The message is followed by 35 seconds of silence and then is repeated.

We identified four behavioral hypotheses that may contribute to hang-ups:

1. **The importance of emotion.** Calling the NDVH is likely to be stressful and emotionally painful because of the content of the calls, and waiting on the line in silence may trigger callers to ruminate on fearful thoughts and the stress of waiting. The current recorded message and subsequent silence that callers experience is likely to be unpleasant and stressful, which may increase the likelihood of hang-ups.
2. **Uncertainty around wait time.** Callers do not know how long they will be waiting, and the uncertainty may make them more likely to hang up. Additionally, callers may have only a small window in which to make the call due to safety reasons and may need to hang up based on their available timeframe.
3. **Lack of justification for the wait.** Unexplained waits are more unpleasant, and the current recorded message does not provide a compelling reason for why the caller is waiting on the line.
4. **Unmanaged expectations.** Callers may expect to reach a live person and the recorded message may trigger surprise and frustration that their call was not immediately answered by an advocate.

The team is currently exploring several bundled interventions to minimize hang-ups, most of which involve managing the perception of wait time. Specifically, the team developed variations of the recorded message that:

- Share testimonials of the help provided by NDVH to survivors of domestic violence, their family and friends, and other types of callers (i.e., service providers, law enforcement, and the general public) to provide motivation for staying on the line and a justification for the wait time.
- Help those callers who identify as survivors of domestic violence feel empowered.
- Employ social norms to encourage callers to wait on the line, by noting that other callers have waited and received help.

Over the next few months, we will rigorously test the effect of a number of message interventions that bundle several of the above variations in order to determine whether hang-ups can be managed in this low-cost, easily implementable way.

Upcoming Milestones

The BIAS Project is committed to bringing insights from behavioral economics to a range of human services programs. We will continue to engage in behavioral mapping — a process to identify behavioral bottlenecks and possible solutions — with existing partners (such as NDVH and the Texas Child Support Division). Pilot testing of the resulting behavioral interventions will begin in earnest in early 2013. We are also currently recruiting new partners to begin behavioral mapping in the first half of 2013.

[i] As cited in Voorhees, Baker, Bourdeau, Brocato, and Cronin (2009). "It depends: Moderating the relationships among perceived waiting time, anger, and regret." *Journal of Service Research*, 12(2), 138-155.

[ii] Indeed, the perception of "wasted time" is growing as our culture generally becomes more accustomed to quality service (fast and available 24 hours) and our available leisure time decreases. Katz, Larson, and Larson (2005). "Prescription for the waiting-in-line blues: Entertain, enlighten, and engage." *Sloan Management Review*, 32(2), 44-53.

[iii] Martin, A. (1983). "Perception and Value Management." *Think Proactive*, 8, 95-101.

[iv] See Maister (1995). "The psychology of waiting lines," <http://davidmaister.com/pdf/PsychologyofWaitingLines751.pdf>, for additional ideas.

[v] Voorhees et al (2009).

[vi] Larson, R. (1987). "Perspectives on queues: Social justice and the psychology of queuing." *Operations Research*, 35(6), 895-905.

[vii] In fiscal year 2010, NDVH received 277,454 phone calls, an average of more than 750 each day.

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