

# READING

## Between THE Lines

Making sense of queue management By Beth Feinstein-Bartl



Photo: Mark A. Steele

*Backpressure eased the impatience of kids waiting to see Santa in several U.S. malls during the 2015 holiday season. Interactive playpods made the queue itself an experience. Kids could jump and sit on fun floor graphics.*



Somewhere, someone waiting in a long, winding line probably channeled Tom Petty, warbling “the waiting is the hardest part” to instill some levity. But retailers don’t view the idea of waiting lightly.

Queue management is both science and art. Done well, it can range from an impulse buyer’s paradise to a nightclub-worthy VIP experience. But it takes careful planning for brick-and-mortar retail, especially in the face of today’s competition from e-commerce and cellular phones.

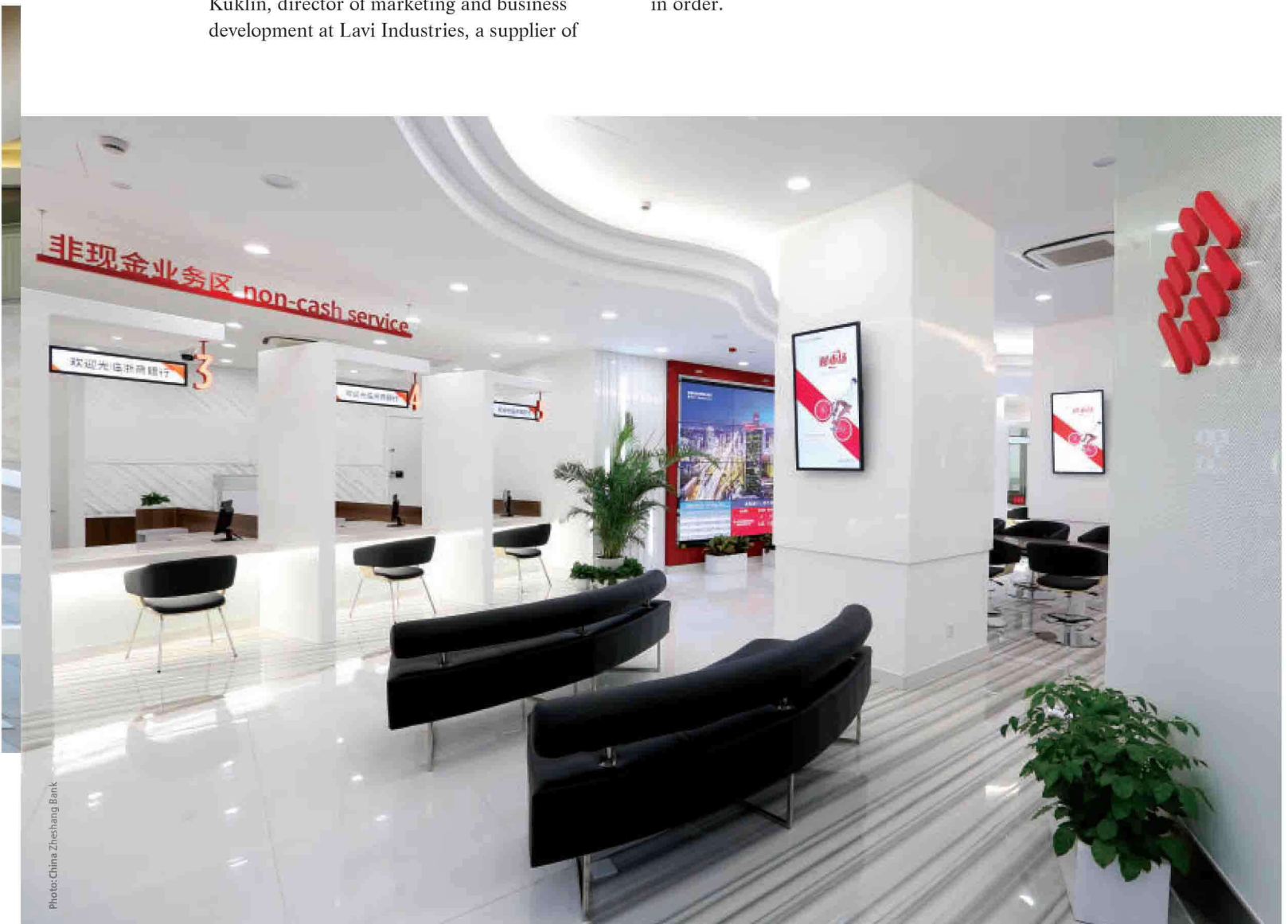
### Making a good impression

“No longer do companies think of queuing in the retail space at the last minute,” says Perry Kuklin, director of marketing and business development at Lavi Industries, a supplier of

public guidance and crowd control solutions. “It’s integrated. Retailers see the check-out as their last opportunity to make a good impression.”

When consulting with retailers, Kuklin adheres to several tried-and-true tenets developed by Harvard Business School professor David H. Maister:

- **Get the process started** with shoppers’ occupied time. For example, offer forms to complete or take orders while people are standing in line.
- **Erase uncertainty.** Provide customers with expected wait times.
- **Instill a perception of fairness.** A single-line queue reassures shoppers they’ll be served in order.



Technology is changing queue management at banks. China Zheshang Bank customers log into kiosks, much like at airports. Shikatani Lacroix Design addressed the need for digital-only and conventional services at this Hangzhou branch.



*Technology by Lavi Industries begins the queuing process when a customer enters this FLOW telecommunications store in Montego Bay, Jamaica. The touchscreen system assesses customer need based on response to questions, routing data to the appropriate department. Customers can shop while they wait, checking the status of their place in the queue at multiple digital screens, which also play digital content. The engaging environment designed by Shikatani Lacroix encourages exploration.*



### Sweetening the experience

These principles can be crucial for retailers and brand marketers. Nearly 80% of shoppers have left a store due to long lines, and 73% of sales are lost when a line is abandoned, according to a recent study by technology company Adyen. The study, which surveyed 2,000 U.S. shoppers aged 18 to 55, found the average threshold for waiting in line to be 10 minutes.

There's no sugarcoating the actual act of queuing. But there are ways to sweeten the experience by making it efficient, convenient, enjoyable, and in some cases, even elegant.

Custom display company 10-31 Inc. is experiencing growing sales of its Q-Cord from retailers seeking a sleek, discreet look, says William Stender, president. Originally designed for the museum market, the product is in several Westfield malls, including New York's World Trade Center Oculus. With a post diameter of 1.75 in., the product fulfills the requirements of queuing using minimal mass, he says.

"We had a booth at GlobalShop and received a lot of comments from designers who want to implement this as part of their master plans," Stender says.



Photo: Milesiko Creative Imaging

*An upstream ordering queue process enabled this Chick-fil-A in Midtown Manhattan to more than triple the production volume vs. previous high-volume locations. As the customer enters the queue, a team member walks beside them to explain the menu and enter the order on an iPad. This enables the order to be ready as the customer arrives at the serving counter to pay.*

**Alleviating anxiety**

Museums aren't the only places giving cues to retail queues. Theme parks have been entertaining waiting throngs with broadcasting programming, and the concept has since spread to fuel pumps, banks, and stores, says Tony Camilletti, EVP of design firm D|Fab (Design Fabrications).

"Queuing can be the most frustrating transaction a customer will experience during their shopping trip," Camilletti says. "Their perception of the wait can skew reality by the mere fact that customers are bored and typically believe they chose the wrong line, thereby

increasing their perceived wait time by sometimes two to three times."

The most effective strategies for alleviating anxiety and elevating expectations depend on the space. Shopper behavior plays heavily into these designs as well.

"It really comes down to the hard facts of what the retailer can support operationally before we can consider what customer behaviors we can address or appease," Camilletti says.

For instance, don't offer 20 checkout counters if you can only realistically keep five of them operating at any given time. This indicates poor customer service and will instantly influence behavior

“The biggest sea change in retail is the refusal of consumers to waste time queuing at all.”

—Sparks

as well as loyalty and word of mouth, Camilletti says.

Flow patterns and eye movement are important to consider in any store plan, adds Charles Sparks, president and CEO of Charles Sparks + Co. “Shoppers spend much of their time looking at their personal devices,” Sparks says. “It takes extraordinary steps to get their attention.” So impulse items need to be positioned strategically.

### Knowing Brooklyn from Biloxi

It’s important to go beyond the project’s walls too. Regional research is key, advises Paul Conder, a customer experience specialist with CallisonRTKL.

Brooklyn isn’t Biloxi and vice versa. It’s the same internationally. “In my previous position, I did work in Mexico and I engaged with Mexican designers and researchers,” Conder says. “You want to be conscious of who you are designing for.”

In some places, queuing becomes an integral part of the show. “In Japanese retail, the detail is amazing,” Conder explains. “Even at a small bakery, when you get up to the front, there’s often a ritual and theater to how the staff might produce one little éclair. You’ve been waiting, but it can be an elegant experience.”

Jewelry stores provide another example of how to make a wait worthwhile

via choreographed packaging routines. These motions, often precise and done with great flourish, not only add to the customer journey. They create back-pressure on the queue, which allows the service enough time to fulfill the product.

Other benefits include breaking down social barriers. This is exactly the case at a chain of restaurants in China, where queuing is a significant portion of the customer experience, says Jean-Pierre Lacroix, president of Shikatani Lacroix Design.

### Trekking with technology

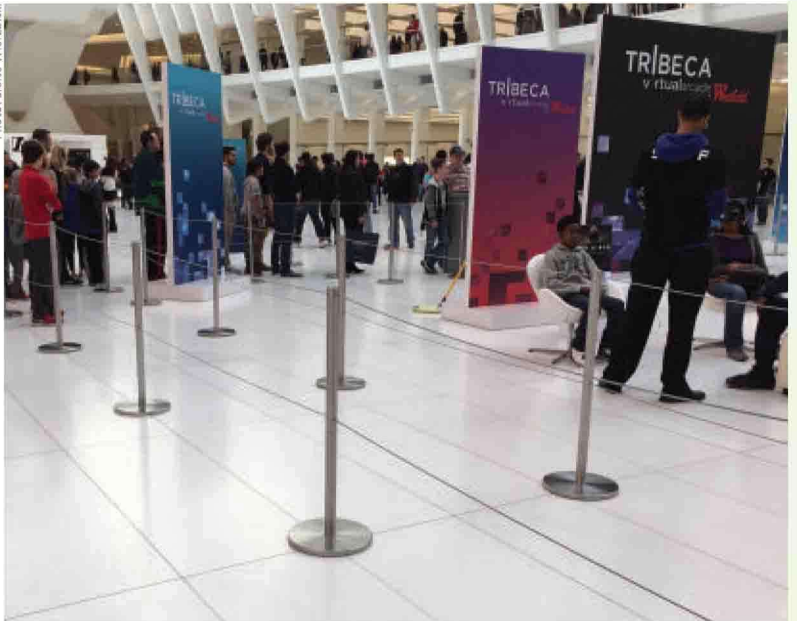
So when did all this standing around start? The modern concept can be

*Lavi’s QtracVR system enables customers to make an appointment for service before coming in. The system reduces wait time and helps retailers manage service workload.*



Photos: Lavi Industries

Photo: Etoile Werzicki



*Q-Cord from 10-31 Inc. is used at several Westfield malls, including the Oculus at the World Trade Center in New York.*

*Aramark uses Lavi’s NeXtrac queue at events such as this popup store for the 2014 MLB All-Star Game in Minneapolis. After its use here, the queue system guided shoppers at the 2015 Superbowl.*

## DESIGNING FOR A TOP-OF-THE-LINE IN-STORE EXPERIENCE

The pesky pain points of queuing can be alleviated. CallisonRTKL's Paul Conder shares how:

- Use backpressure. A moment to look at a menu or check out the dessert display can be beneficial to the customer's journey.
- Design from the customer's sight line. Don't tier merchandise below waist height unless the queue allows people to stand back from the display.
- Spread out. A single queue feeding into multiple service points will feel much faster than multiple queues.
- Relax the line. Greeting customers or adding services can shrink wait time perception and improve sales.
- Consider perception. Design lengthy lines so that the customer feels they are getting closer to the destination at every step. Switchbacks that take a customer away from the end of the queue can make the line feel longer.
- Whenever possible, have one entry. Having multiple queues intermix slows down the feeder queues and can create the perception that some lines move faster than others.
- Take advantage of technology. Mobile POS, table staff assistants, and digital appointment makers streamline service and can greatly reduce queues at the POS, alleviating the biggest customer pain point in retail.



A circular cashwrap with multiple POS stations speeds transactions while providing merchandising for impulse items at this busy airport shop designed by RGLA Solutions in the Buffalo Niagara International Airport in New York.

traced to revolutionary France and most likely made its way to England around 1837, according to David Andrews, author of *Why Does the Other Line Always Move Faster? The Myths and Misery, Secrets and Psychology of Waiting in Line*.

What the future holds depends on whom you ask and where the line is forming—or not. Forming.

“The biggest sea change going on in retail right now is the refusal of consumers to waste time queuing at all, or any activity that limits their choices,” Sparks says.

More shoppers now buy from Amazon than in stores, and the strongest growth in retail is with brands that offer shoppers seamless ways to access what they want. Queuing won't be with us in a few years other than functioning as part of a positive exposure to new promotions, sampling, incentives, ideas, and a good use of the consumer's time, Sparks adds.

In luxury retail, virtual queuing is highly preferred. It comes with many

advantages. “It identifies the customers,” Kuklin explains. “It can personalize, prepare, even bump people up in line if they are VIPs without others knowing. It's very discreet.”

Lacroix predicts a combination of technology, new store design, and payment methods such as mobile wallets. His firm's design for China Zheshang Bank reflects the growing appetite for digital services. Customers there have been preconditioned to log into kiosks, much like at airports. They can open an account or get a credit card and never talk to someone, Lacroix says.

### Changing the flow

So is this the end of the line for queuing? Not completely.

“There's still a place for queuing, and there are retailers who are very effective at it,” says Mare Weiss, senior associate at design firm Bergmeyer Associates.



Photo: Kwesi Budu-Arthur

*Queue management needs at this San Francisco 49ers Team Store vary radically depending on the game schedule. Bergmeyer Associates designed impulse-buy fixtures that transform into temporary POS units on game days. The solution speeds fans through checkout during busy times without making the store seem empty at other times.*

“Customers are bored and typically believe they chose the wrong line, so they can perceive that they’re waiting two to three times longer than they actually are.”

—Camilletti

Sephora, Marshalls, and T.J. Maxx as examples of brick-and-mortar stores that are extremely effective at boosting sales with impulse buys, Weiss adds.

“Service areas or departments within the store that require queuing always complicate the space planning and challenge merchandising,” Sparks says. “We constantly try to expose queuing area to as many displays and impulse items as possible, which contributes greatly to sales and store profitability.”

In other spaces, making tweaks and improvements helps greatly. Weiss recalls her biggest queuing conundrum: managing crowd control at the San Francisco 49ers flagship stadium store.

The queues are designed to hold 50 people. That’s fine on non-game days. But when the 49ers play, visitation swells tremendously. So impulse-buy fixtures are rolled out and transformed into temporary POS units, Weiss says.

Eloise Wierzbicki, sales and customer service rep for 10-31, sees similar demands for flexibility. “We’re experi-

“Retailers see the checkout as their last opportunity to make a good impression.”

—Kuklin

encing more requests from our clients,” she says. “In airport terminals, for example, the Q-Cord and magnetic base are easily removable so the floors can be waxed nightly.”

### Fitting the brand

It’s about what fits the brand, Conder says.

“I can’t say queues will go away completely,” he says. “There will still be a need, for practical reasons, at big-box discount retailers. It lets the customer think they are getting a good deal. It’s a warehouse aesthetic.”

Other brands will rely on queues to generate excitement. In those cases, the systems will function more like a nightclub to create energy and speak to the product’s rarity, Conder explains.

Many designers see less focus on waiting and more emphasis on personal interactions with amenities that merge the traditional, such as greeters, beverages, and comfortable seating, with omnichannel touches such as scanning and pickup service.

Cashwraps will also undergo changes. Although this component won’t be entirely eliminated, a surface will always be needed to inspect, wrap, and bag goods, Sparks says.

“Customer service is getting more personalized, with face-to-face service supported by digital,” Conder says. “To the customer, the store of the future will look more like the store of the past than the store of the present.”

*Beth Feinstein-Bartl is staff writer for Shop!.*

*A single queue checkout with unique and themed merchandising stations encourage impulse buys at Harvest Market in Champaign, Ill.*

