

While I was waiting for inspiration to write this article, I visited several “waiting” spaces including a doctor’s office, a plane, a train (while they repaired an engine) and a restaurant. While waiting I thought about the fact that the words “wait” and “weight” sound alike but have different meanings. Then I wondered if the two words actually have more in common than originally thought. As the act of waiting for something could be a very “weighty” activity. For example, waiting for the availability of a transplant organ or a child to adopt can be very serious business for some—full of hope, anticipation, and some anxiety.

What Are You **Waiting** For?

by Cynthia Froggatt

It is not always obvious if someone is engaged in the activity of “waiting” or for that matter what is it they are waiting for. We assume a person seated in an office lobby is waiting to meet with someone. People standing in front of a bank of elevators appear to be waiting to go to

another floor. Likewise, those in the waiting area of an emergency room are assumed to need medical attention. However, everyone in these “waiting places” has a different reason for being there and thus the task of designing or managing waiting places can be very complex.

Consider the airport—a place that most of us are familiar with where wait times have definitely increased due to higher security.



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People who are waiting at an airport include a diverse sub-set of the population, from the very young to the very old. They represent different reasons for traveling (personal or business), a variety of emotions (excited, anxious, sad etc.) and many are eager to just get on board and get moving. Some passengers arrive very early and wait a long time while others arrive at the last minute (intentionally or accidentally) and have to run for the gate. Some travel solo, others in pairs and still others with three or four children in tow. Because weather and mechanical difficulties affect operations, the wait times are often unpredictable.

What kind of a waiting area could possibly accommodate all of these people? The answer is a place that does not suggest a one-size-fits-all mentality. And while there are some generic features of a space where people wait (seating, reading material etc.)—one should not assume all spaces are the same.

Consider the various roles a waiting place could play. Its most basic one is to provide shelter. Most of us would choose to wait indoors rather than outdoors (unless, you are in the Honolulu Airport where there is a lovely outdoor garden to pass the time before your flight). On the opposite end of the spectrum is the opportunity to leverage a waiting space to provide an overall experience. The Walt Disney company appears to have their waiting spaces (usually a line of people) down to a real art form. In very entertaining ways they create an “experience” while waiting to get on a fantasy ride. This often takes the form of jugglers or costumed characters working the crowd and a set design supporting the anticipated ride. They even offer the opportunity to pre-book your ride in advance so you do not have to wait in line at all. As another example Krispie Kreme doughnuts® offers free samples to people waiting in line.

No matter how creative, very few people would say they really enjoy waiting for anything. We try to avoid waiting, but when this doesn't work, we attempt to distract ourselves from the discomfort of waiting. Generally, most people like to use their wait time as effectively as possible. In a hospital (or most anywhere), a cell phone and laptop can turn a waiting area into an office or a place to catch up on personal business. Most hospitals include places to buy reading material or other goods that provide information or distraction. Many also provide the opportunity to watch television, consume food or beverages, pray and reflect, view artwork and sculptures or simply look out a window. Some organizations even design their waiting spaces to intentionally share their overall culture by displaying legacy and/or current products, company mission, press releases, and prestigious awards.

We've all experienced well-planned waiting places and know how valuable a positive experience can be. I actually now like to have a stopover at the Northwest terminal in the Detroit airport because I get a chance to see a fabulous, utterly captivating water fountain while waiting for a connecting flight. Arriving early for a meeting at the IBM

headquarters in Armonk allows me to tinker with their new equipment and applications on display while waiting in the lobby. I enjoy waiting for trains in Grand Central Terminal because the space is beautiful and I'm fascinated by the incredible number of people who move through the great hall without ever bumping into each other. These are well-planned waiting places.

We have become increasingly less tolerant of waiting (consider how long are you willing to wait to download an e-mail with an attachment today as opposed to two or three years ago) and have higher expectations for the options that will be available to us while we are waiting. There is, indeed, an important link between "wait" and "weight"—the more facilities planners and managers can lighten the burden of waiting, the more pleasant the experience of waiting will be. Now more than ever, places need to be planned for multi-users who are multi-tasking.

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Questions to consider when planning a "waiting space."

What types of people use the waiting place?

What are people waiting for?

What are the minimum, maximum, and average waiting times?

Are people a captive audience or do they have choices?

What is the effect (possible cost) of a negative waiting experience?

What is the benefit of providing a positive experience?

What other activities could people be engaged in while they are waiting?

What options would be appreciated to use time more effectively or provide a distraction?