



“Your call is important to us...”

Why does the British love of queuing  
not extend to contact centres?

A study carried out in association with



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In May, thousands of shoppers were willing to queue eight hours before Top Shop opened its Kate Moss collection to the public, and people queued from 5am outside Boots to purchase a much sought-after beauty serum. Yet stories are numerous of the UK public's dislike of queuing to speak with someone in a contact centre.

Evidently, the British are willing to queue for some services and products, but not for others - but why, and for how long?

### **Methodology**

A short telephone questionnaire was asked to a representative sample of the UK population between 18<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> July 2007 by ICM Research, a top research company. Analysis and interpretation of the 1,004 responses was carried out by ContactBabel, leading contact centre industry analysts, on behalf of Vicorp.

### **Headline findings**

- **The average length that people believe they wait in a contact centre queue is almost 11½ minutes**
- **The reality is that the average contact centre queuing time is just under 30 seconds, meaning that people *believe* they are queuing for 27 times longer than they actually are**
- **People are prepared to wait longest in a contact centre queue to book their holiday (8.2 minutes), and shortest to check their bank balance (4.2 minutes)**
- **18-24 year-olds will wait an average of 60% longer than the 65+ age group in a contact centre queue**
- **The biggest problem people have with contact centre queues is not knowing how much longer they will have to wait to speak to someone**
- **Over half of respondents will happily use self-service to check bank balances and make simple purchases (such as cinema tickets), and 48% are happy to pay a bill through automated systems.**

## What contact centre services are people willing to wait for?



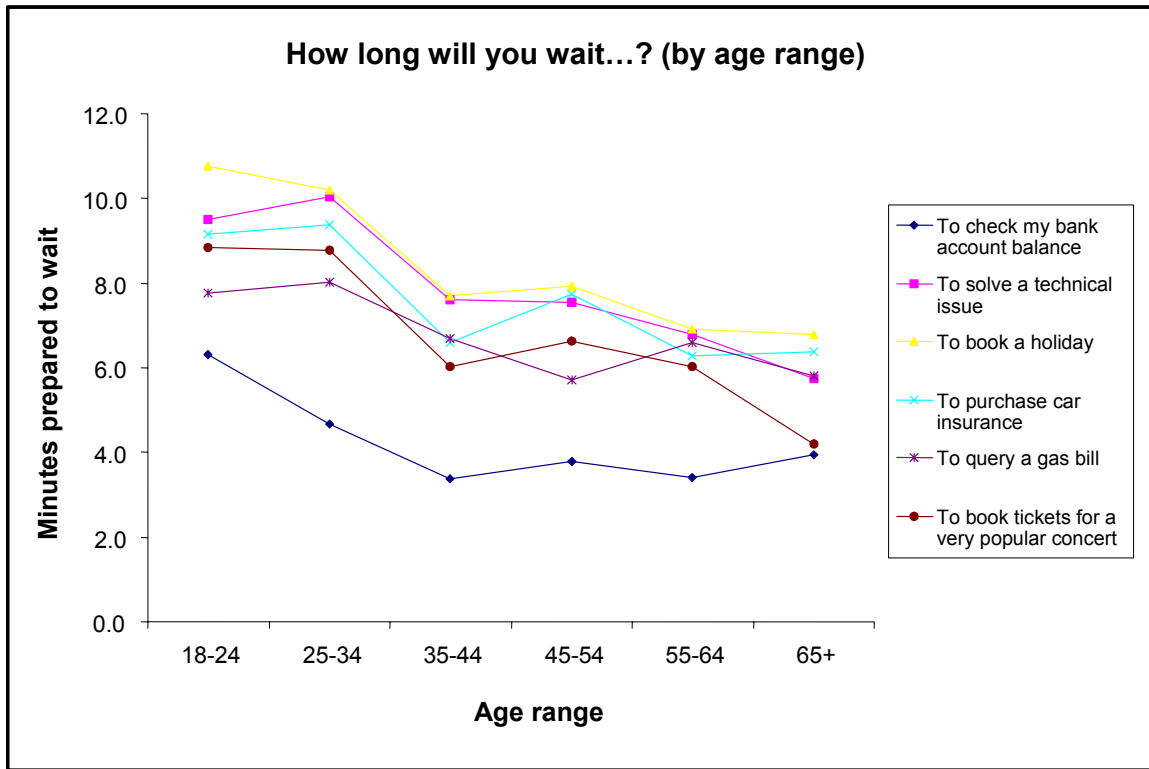
Table 1: How long would you wait...?

Activity / time prepared to wait	Less than 1 minute	1 - 5 mins	6 - 10 mins	11 - 20 mins	As long as it takes	Don't know	Average (mins)
To book a holiday	8%	13%	16%	18%	27%	17%	8.2
To solve a technical issue	6%	20%	16%	17%	32%	9%	7.7
To purchase car insurance	9%	19%	17%	17%	18%	20%	7.5
To query a gas bill	6%	24%	19%	12%	28%	11%	6.7
To book tickets for a very popular concert	10%	21%	16%	12%	25%	16%	6.5
<b>To check my bank account balance</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>4.2</b>

Almost one-third of the UK population say that they will wait as long as they have to in order to have a technical issue solved (such as not having an Internet connection, or losing the TV satellite signal).

However, people are prepared to wait longest to book their holiday, while they will wait only around half this time to check their bank balance.

As a rule, the public say that they will wait longer to buy something than they will to make a service request.



There is a definite tendency for younger people to be more patient when calling a contact centre. The 18-24 year-old group is prepared to queue an average of 60% longer than the 65+ age group would, and in the case of booking concert tickets, this differential doubles.

### How long do people wait - and how long do they think they wait...?

The average time that a customer has to wait in a telephone queue before talking to an agent is fairly consistent, with contact centres reporting average queue times between 16 seconds and 35 seconds for the past five years<sup>1</sup>.

As “average speed to answer” is one of the most widely-used and closely-monitored measures that contact centres have, we can be almost positive that, *on average*, customers are waiting perhaps half a minute to speak to an agent in a contact centre.

This fact makes it fascinating to see that the UK public believe that they are waiting an average of over 11 minutes to speak with an agent - twenty-seven times longer than they actually are.

It’s well known that ten minutes in a dentist’s chair can seem like a lifetime, but this time-stretching phenomenon is taken to another level by the feelings of suffering and boredom that contact centre queues create in customers.

<sup>1</sup> Based on interviews with over 1,100 UK contact centres over five years (Source: ContactBabel, “The UK Contact Centre Operational Review, 2003-2007 editions)



## Why do people hate queuing so much...?

Queuing is a very British pastime, so why does the public dislike contact centre queues so much?

Table 2: What is it about contact centre queues that people dislike?

Reason	Average score from 10 where 10 is "extremely frustrating"	% of public scoring this as 10 out of 10
Not knowing how much longer you'll have to wait	8.7	61%
Repetitive announcements	8.0	45%
Having to restate account information already given earlier in the call	8.0	45%
Can't do anything else in the meantime	7.9	46%
<b>The music you have to listen to</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>39%</b>

## Would people rather wait to talk to people, or use self-service...?

Increasingly, callers are being encouraged to deal with simple queries themselves, often through pressing buttons on the telephone. Many banks provide an option to their customers where they can check account balances without speaking with anyone in the contact centre. Cinemas encourage customers to buy tickets through using a telephone self-service option, and utility companies often have an automated meter reading service available.

The theory behind self-service is that the customer doesn't have to wait around in a queue to get their job done, and the business doesn't have to bear the cost of these 'unnecessary' calls. As a result, the callers who do have to speak to a real person about an issue will have a shorter queuing time as a result of so many simple requests being dealt with through self-service. It's a win-win situation.

At least, it is in theory.



Table 3: Self-service, or wait for a person...?

Activity / Person or Self-Service	Check a bank balance	Pay a bill	Check a delivery time	Buy cinema tickets
Wait to speak to a person	41%	47%	58%	36%
Use self-service straightaway	26%	21%	16%	25%
Have no preference	26%	27%	24%	31%
<b>Don't know</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>7%</b>

The reality seems to be that although there are a large number of people who would prefer to use a self-service option, and get on with their lives, there are also a substantial number of people for whom speaking to a real person is paramount, even in cases where it would be quicker to do things themselves.

People are most comfortable using self-service to check a bank account balance, and are also quite relaxed about purchasing their cinema tickets through an automated process.

However, many customers still require the reassurance of talking with a person when they call to pay a bill. Checking a delivery time may develop into a conversation: questions such as "What if I'm out?", "Can I give you an alternative telephone number?", "I might take a while to come to the door - will they wait?" require a real person to help.

There are some interesting age-related issues raised: the 25-34 age group prefers to use self-service to check their bank balances, and the under-35 age group would choose to buy cinema tickets through self-service than speak with a person.

The strongest message that can be taken from the figures above is that most people are generally content to use self-service for simple activities, even if most will not actively choose it over speaking with a person. Over half of respondents will happily use self-service to check bank balances and make simple purchases (such as cinema tickets), and 48% are happy to pay a bill through automated systems. Even with activities that could end up requiring a conversation - such as checking a delivery time - 40% say they wouldn't mind doing this through self-service.

However, it is vital for companies to understand that callers may sometimes need the reassurance of talking with an agent, and may have more complex questions that need answering by a real person. In such cases, it should be easy for the caller to speak with a person, although some companies seem to get carried away with offering self-service options, and make it next-to-impossible for the caller to speak to a real person.

### Contact centre, or High Street...?

Despite the convenience and long working hours that contact centres offer to the British public, most still state that they would prefer to go to the High Street to pay bills, book tickets and buy insurance.

The days of making a special journey to visit an insurance broker’s office and wait while they find the right car insurance offer are long gone and unmissed for most of us, yet the majority of the survey’s respondents say that they would rather do that than wait 30 seconds (or 11½ minutes, depending on whether we are dealing with reality or perception) for a contact centre agent to answer the phone.

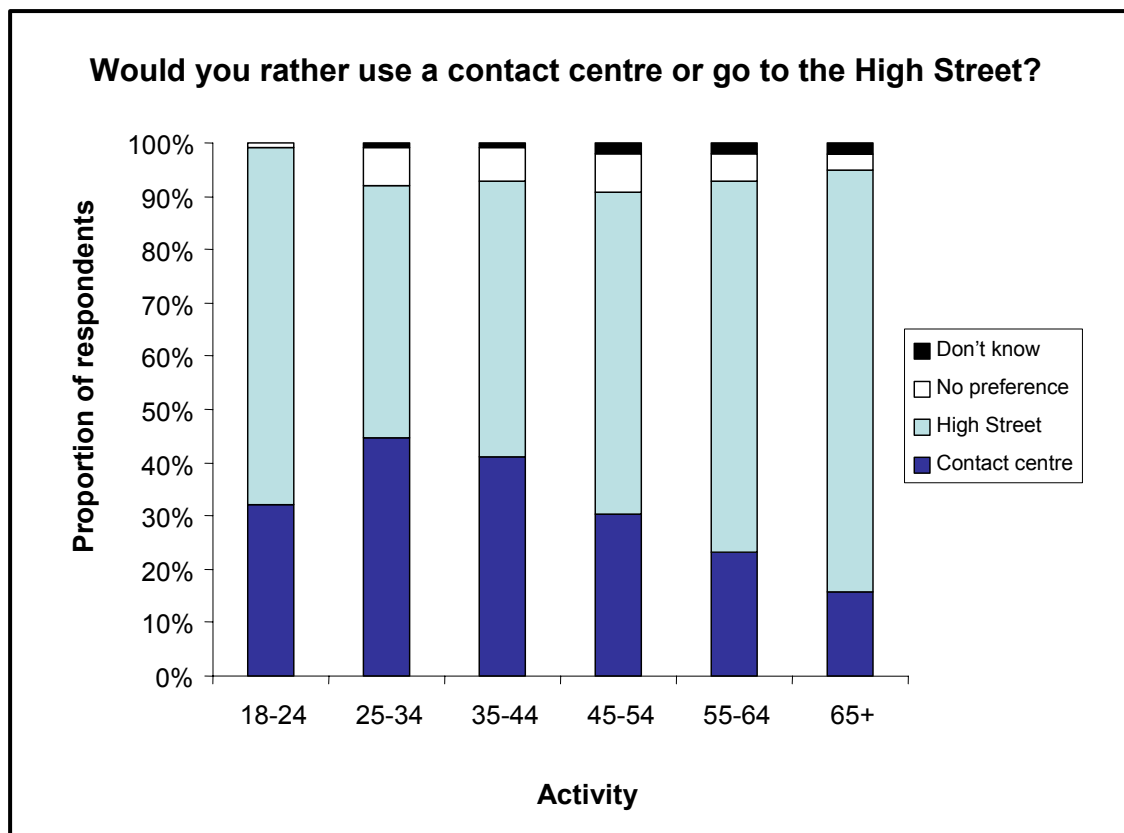


Table 4: Overall, do you prefer being able to call a contact centre to pay bills, book tickets and buy insurance etc, or would you prefer to go to a High Street shop or bank?

Activity / Age group	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Contact centre	32%	45%	41%	30%	23%	16%
High Street	67%	48%	52%	60%	69%	80%
No preference	1%	7%	6%	7%	5%	3%
<b>Don't know</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>



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The 25-44 age group are definitely more receptive to using contact centres, perhaps as a result of having less time to go to the High Street than the oldest or youngest adult groups. This hypothesis is further borne out when looking at the socio-demographic profiles - the high-earning AB group are more than twice as likely as the DE segment to choose contact centre over High Street, and full-time workers of any description are 65% more likely than non-workers to prefer contact centres. So it seems that for the time-poor amongst us, contact centres are a blessing, even if the queues - real or imagined - can be a frustration.

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### **About ContactBabel**



ContactBabel are the contact centre industry experts. The coverage provided by our massive and ongoing primary research projects is matched by our experience analysing the contact centre industry. We understand how technology, people and process best fit together, and how they will work collectively in the future.

ContactBabel was set up in 2000 by Steve Morrell, a leading expert on the contact centre industry. Previously, he was the global head of Datamonitor's contact centre and CRM analysis divisions and is widely-quoted in industry journals and the international media as the author of key studies of the UK, US, Irish, South African and Indian contact centre markets.

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### **About Vicorp**



Vicorp are a leading provider of speech self-service solutions across all verticals of the Contact Centre Industry. Vicorp have a unique approach to designing, creating, configuring, testing, debugging, deploying and then managing of solutions, that maximises, re-usability, flexibility and asset protection, whilst minimising ongoing maintenance investment. Vicorp are the only independent service creation solution provider with a commitment to remaining truly agnostic at the technology platform layer. This enables businesses to focus at realising the business benefits of self-service automation independently of your technology layer.

For further enquiries go to [www.vicorp.com](http://www.vicorp.com) or call.

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