

Waiting-Line Priority Rule of Service

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In most retail checkout situations, customers have been socialized to follow and accept the First-Come-First-Served (FCFS) approach to checkout service. When this priority rule of customer service has been put in place by a retailer or other service facility (e.g., passport office, tax office) customers/clients also expect it to be followed. This next-in-line approach to customer service is generally perceived to be a fair and equitable approach to dealing with the arrival of customers at the checkout or service area.

There are three common *arrangements* for the provision of checkout service in a retail store. One arrangement is the *single customer-line with a single service facility approach* [i.e., customers form a single line as they approach the checkout area and all customers are served at the same checkout facility (e.g., convenience store, such as 7-11)]. A second approach is the *single customer-line with multiple service facilities* arrangement [i.e., customers form a single line and move to the next available checkout facility (e.g., cashier or bank teller) when available)]. A third approach is the *multiple customer-line with multiple service facilities arrangement* [i.e., individual customers select one of the multiple lines that are staffed to enter and are serviced at the selected facility (e.g., supermarkets)].

The term, *single-channel*, is used to describe the arrangement where there is just one service facility (e.g., one cashier). When there is more than one service facility (e.g., multiple checkout lanes), the arrangement is referred to as a *multiple-channel* service facility. If all of the service needs of a customer can be completed in one step, then the arrangement is referred to as a *single-phase* arrangement (e.g., cashier tallies and bags purchase and collects payment). If the customer transaction requires the completion of a number of steps involving more than one service facility, then the situation is referred to as a *multiple-phase* arrangement [e.g., Phase 1: customer pays for a microwave at the service (cash) desk in Sears, Phase 2: customer drives to customer service door to pick up microwave at the loading dock].

Questions:

1. Draw and label a diagram for each of the following waiting-line arrangements: single customer-line with single service facility, single customer-line with multiple service facilities, and multiple customer-lines with multiple service facilities.
2. Provide examples with which you are familiar of each of the three identified service arrangements. Explain each situation from both descriptive and conceptual perspectives.

3. Are there any other service arrangements, besides the three identified in the case, with which you are familiar? Explain each arrangement using a specific example from both descriptive and conceptual perspectives.
4. Describe the nature of the arrangement from both descriptive and conceptual perspectives for the following situation:

A customer arrives at the prescription pick-up counter of a drugstore. There is confusion about which drugs should be covered by his drug plan. A lengthy discussion takes place between the customer and the cashier. There is only one cashier and one operational cash register at this location. A second register is not available for use [i.e., contains no cash (i.e., no float) and there is no link for credit/debit card transactions].

Other customers begin to arrive, forming a single line. The waiting time for these other customer increases while the concerns of the lead customer are sorted out. There are now four customers in line waiting to be served.

Another cashier arrives and begins to call on the next customer in line; however, just at that moment, the phone at the pick-up counter rings. The second cashier answers it, ignoring the next customer in line. The second cashier then moves about 10 ft. away from the register area so she can access customer files on a computer. She continues to talk to the customer on the phone using a phone next to the computer. The customers waiting in line continue to wait, including the “next” customer.

Once the first cashier finishes dealing with the lead customer in line, she turns her attention to the “next” customer in line. The second cashier is still on the phone.

Was this situation handled correctly by the two cashiers? Explain.

5. Sometimes, in the area of customer service, a *pre-emptive rule* is or needs to be implemented. This rule states that under certain circumstances a given customer/client is given a higher service priority, allowing that individual to interrupt the service being received or to be received by another customer/client. Is there any evidence that a pre-emptive rule is being applied in the situation described in Question 4? If so, was it appropriate to have such a rule in this situation? Explain.
6. What service situations have you faced where there is evidence of a pre-emptive rule? Explain the situation.

7. What other situations can you think of where a pre-emptive rule would exist? Would such a rule be appropriate in each of these situations?
8. To what extent is a waiting-line priority rule used and what is the nature of the rule when an online service facility provides a customer service telephone number for the customer to use to contact the service provider. Provide both descriptive and conceptual perspectives of such a situation. What specific examples of such a situation have you faced? Explain.
9. In the case of online shopping, the customer goes through the process of finding the desired items, placing the items in a shopping basket or going directly to the checkout stage. In either case, when the customer is ready to make the actual purchase, a number of back-office activities are carried out as the customer as the customer begins the order fulfillment process. To what extent is a waiting-line priority rule used and what is the nature of the rule when purchasing goods through an online service facility (i.e., order fulfillment process)? Provide both descriptive and conceptual perspectives of such a situation. What specific examples of such a situation have you faced? Explain.

[For further discussion of the focus of this case, see the following resources: (1) Krajewski, L. J. & Ritzman, L. P. (2005). *Operations Management* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education. (2) Turban, E., King, D., McKay, J., Marshall, P., Lee, J., & Viehland, D. (2008). *Electronic Commerce 2008*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.]