

ON-HOLD MESSAGES...

"Gimmick" or Quantifiable Advertising Medium?

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The proliferation of on-hold message services, and the teleprofessionals willing to recommend them over the last several years, has resulted in much discussion about the proper method of implementing an on-hold message program: "digital versus tape-driven," "endless-loop versus auto-reverse," "short 3-4 minute versions versus longer 6-12 minute versions." Much of this decision has rested on the perception of the program on the part of the teleprofessional. Can you determine which is the most appropriate on-hold message program for a specific application? What is your perception of on-hold messages... gimmick or quantifiable advertising medium?

While technology and budget are major considerations, the most crucial element in the decision process is often overlooked. Just as in radio and television, audience size and listening patterns must determine how to program your "station," not personal preference, bias, or perception. Fail to respond to your on-hold audience, and your listeners are likely to change the station!

Let's take a look at a typical on-hold message program, and the reasons why a company may choose it over other on-hold choices. The typical on-hold message program offers some mixture of studio-produced announcer messages with instrumental accompaniment connected to a company's telephone system music on-hold (MOH) input. In most cases, the overall length is 3-6 minutes, and is changed at some regular interval, usually at the request of the company.

Though the reasons for incorporating an on-hold message into a telephone system are varied, the following represent the majority expressed to us by existing customers.

Poor Radio Reception - Most KSUs and PBXs are located in obscure places, resulting in poor radio reception.

Eliminating Licensing Fees - When you play a radio station at home, it's free. But if you play a radio on hold at your business, you must pay licensing fees. These are talented folk who deserve to be paid for their expertise, especially if you profit from them. If you produce an on-hold message program, you won't be playing a radio station anymore, but this does eliminate the licensing fees for the music and announcers. Be sure the productions you purchase (or

"Just one call every five minutes on-hold for only 30 seconds during a 10-hour work day, equals approximately 250 hours per year."

lease) are licensed for use on-hold.

Promoting the Business - Best reason so far! Point-of-Purchase advertising is often the most successful at delivering verifiable, immediate results. So much of this country's business is conducted over the telephone, I challenge you to name a better "point-of-purchase" that offers more traffic primed to do business!

Controlling the Entire Telephone Experience - Most businesses experience occasional heavy-calling periods, leaving callers on-hold longer than they'd like. Utilizing the opportunity to talk to their customers on-hold for less than the cost of a postage stamp makes good business sense.

Silence is Not Golden - The latest telephone systems are virtually silent on hold, if there is no music. In this silence, seconds seem to turn into minutes, minutes into hours. Caller patience wears out all too quickly. Some callers hang up and call back, thinking their call had been disconnected, resulting in disgruntled customers.

How does one determine the size of the on-hold audience, and how does this relate to message length, and whether to use a cassette player or a digital announcer? Many think the longer the hold-time, the longer your message must be. This is not necessarily a reliable rule.

Longer messages restrict the use of digital technology. Until recently, the longest duration digital playback units had a capacity of only 6-8 minutes, and those with greater capacity were cost-prohibitive. Shorter message lengths (three minutes or less) almost always require digital players, since shorter-length endless loop cassettes wear out too quickly, and cause their players to prematurely wear.

The frequency of regular customers calling back will determine the recommended overall length of your on-hold message, the type and style of playback equipment, and the frequency of your production changes. The more often a caller calls back, the better the chances of hearing the same portion of the message. Constant repetition is an audience killer. (Think about how much you hate reruns of your favorite show.)

Imagine how long a radio station would succeed if it only featured one announcer and one music selection, all the time.

Even the most professional on-hold production will eventually wear out the patience of regular callers. Last month's number one song is probably not number one this month, and may not be on the charts at all in a month from now.

The lesson we can learn is to change your on-hold message frequently enough, or to utilize a longer-length production, so that frequent callers hear a different portion each time they call, avoiding annoying repetition. Our studies indicate that an audience hearing the same portion of an on-hold message at a frequency of 1.8 times within the short period of 1-2 months is acceptable repetition. More than 2.0 in the same period, and the collective patience begins to wear thin.

While a frequency of 3.0 in mass media advertising is considered optimum, it can be disastrous for an on-hold audience with frequent call-backs. One must consider that a mass media audience chooses to listen or view the program electively. Your callers may have elected to call you initially, but given the choice, they would not wish to be kept waiting on hold. This may account for their shorter attention spans.

Questions which help to determine the characteristics of an on-hold audience include:

- 1) How many calls does your business receive daily?
- 2) What is the average length of time spent on hold?
- 3) How often do your most frequent callers call back?
- 4) Does your business experience a seasonal change of sales and/or public interest information?
- 5) How much does your company pay per 1,000 people reached through conventional advertising means?

The answers to these questions will provide surprisingly accurate on-hold audience estimates, and a fair cost comparison of your on-hold message program to mass media advertising. It also helps determine the proper mix of equipment and productions for your company, in accordance with actual incoming call patterns, instead of random guesswork. Our company routinely conducts hold-time analyses like these, and the results are generally astounding!

Just one call every five minutes on-hold for only 30 seconds during a 10-hour work day, equals approximately 250 hours per year. This is the equivalent of six 40-hour work weeks of your callers' undivided attention per year!

Most businesses are amazed to see how many hours accumulate on their hold button throughout the year!

Call-accounting packages, while helpful at determining accurate in-coming and out-going call information, only tell half the tale. A moment or two with your company's receptionist, call center operator, telecommunications and/or marketing director will usually help to interpolate the entire on-hold story. Operator estimates may not be exact, but compared to estimates provided by media ratings services for radio and TV, they are quite accurate. Your receptionist's livelihood depends on the close, reliable monitoring of your company's switchboard!

One Pittsburgh health spa estimates their callers spend 102.5 40-hour work weeks per year waiting on hold! The local transit authority? 96.3 weeks each year. A national brokerage firm with offices in 400+ cities yields an audience worthy of Dan Rather during election coverage. Even my humble ad agency of seven people sharing three lines amasses

over 12 weeks of valuable customer free time on hold - free time for us to promote our services via the hold button.

If these estimates are shocking, wait until you evaluate your firm's own hold patterns! What will be equally revealing is the savings in a cost-per-thousand (CPM) comparison over other advertising media. Advertising on hold should be less expensive - after all, its audience is already there! All that is needed is a regiment of audience-appealing productions, designed to appease, inform, and gently suggest items or services that will inevitably increase sales!

Produced correctly, a sales message can be casually disguised as information: "Did you know....," or, "Be sure to ask about..." Your callers will frequently quip when you return to the line, "I didn't know you had...!" or, "You never told me you could...!"

On-hold messages are no longer a gimmick or just a good idea. They make good advertising sense. Careful attention must be given to programming in accord with the audience size and listening habits of your on-hold audience. With proper preparation and analysis of your situation, expect to yield formidable rewards that can rival even the best advertising strategies.



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**ADS ON
HOLD**



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Better Use
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FREE-TIME*!**

*Time callers spend on-hold is "free-time" for you to address a perfectly targeted audience.

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Discover how much free-time you have. Our brief five-minute telephone interview provides a detailed analysis of your free-time on-hold.

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- ☒ The analysis is free.
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