



BRITISH GAS: OUT OF TOUCH

Janet Wood 40, careers adviser

Janet Wood, who has a service contract with British Gas, waited in at home in London for an engineer to come between 10am and 2pm to fix the gas tap on her cooker. When no one turned up, she was told the engineer had got no reply when he visited (though he hadn't left a calling card to prove he'd turned up). The visit was re-booked for 8am to 12pm the next week. At around 11am she phoned to check and was told the engineer wasn't coming as he had the wrong part. At the third attempt the engineer kept the appointment.

Janet feels the service could be easily improved if customers got a phone call on the day to confirm the appointment. She also wants more flexibility with time slots, as she has children. 'They may agree to a 10am to 2pm slot but it means waiting longer for an appointment.'

British Gas admits it misses 80,000 appointments each year – four per cent of the total.

Why are we waiting?

Last year British consumers spent more than 60 million working days waiting in for delivery drivers and workmen. Our survey also reveals who is most – and least – likely to arrive on time

Expecting a parcel or a workman to arrive today? Put the kettle on and make yourself comfortable – you may be in for a long wait. A new *Which?* survey has found that in the last year you wasted 110 million hours waiting in for deliveries that didn't arrive when they were promised – that's almost six million missed deadlines.

British workmen are even bigger offenders, inflicting 158 million hours of thumb twiddling a year on their would-be customers – the equivalent of almost 20 million wasted working days.

OUR SURVEY

We conducted phone interviews with 2,007 members of the public in March 2006. Our thanks to all those who took part.

The late, late show

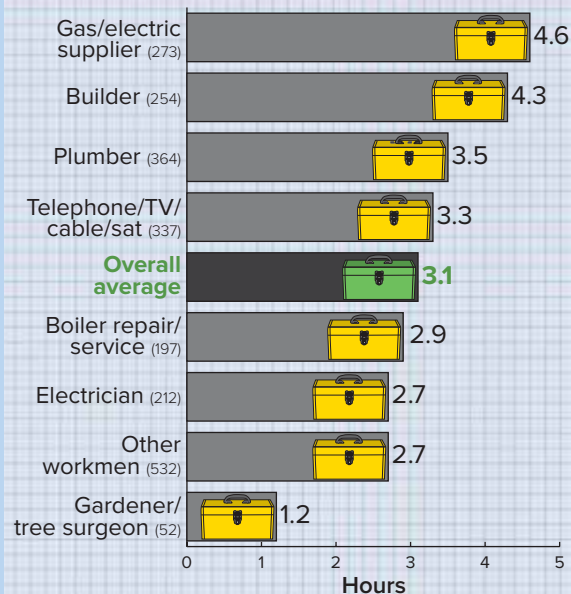
When it comes to workmen, the survey found that the longest waits on average are for gas and electricity suppliers, at around four and half hours, followed by builders. The most prompt workmen are gardeners and tree surgeons. This reflects the fact that energy suppliers are normally unwilling to commit to specific appointment times, preferring instead to offer only a broad time slot for their arrival.

British Gas told us it was looking to narrow down its appointment time slots – the shortest is currently four hours (see 'British Gas: out of touch', above) – to improve things. 'We realise that people have problems with our slot times, especially if they have to go out on the school run,' a spokesperson told us.

In general, workmen in our survey proved more willing to offer an exact time for an appointment than delivery firms, and

WAITING TIME: WORKMEN

The chart shows the average number of hours consumers waited in for workmen in the last 12 months



those who promised to come at an exact time, or in a time slot of less than five hours, were much better at hitting their target than those who made vague promises to arrive some time that day. However, it appears from our figures that when workmen are late, they are very late.

Computer error

According to our survey, it's likely that you will spend more time on average waiting in for computer goods to arrive than any other type of delivery, with home electricals and furniture the next on the list. That ties in with our results for the retailers who leave you waiting longest. On average, people had to wait in for six hours – the better part of a working day – for computer goods from Dell to arrive. Mail-order catalogue firms were almost as bad, keeping customers waiting five hours. Companies who delivered the goods more swiftly, according to the survey, included Amazon, John Lewis and Next.

When we spoke to Dell it told us it was concerned about customer satisfaction but there are lots of reasons why a delivery might not meet the original date. Given that the company charges up to £60 for a single delivery, we feel that it needs take urgent steps to improve the service it is offering.

Time for a change

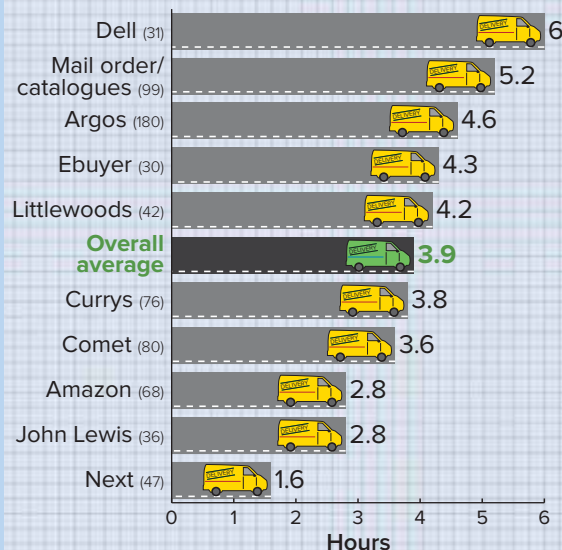
Our survey found that those waiting in for deliveries and workmen spend, on average, almost three working days each year waiting in for them to arrive. The obvious way to reduce this figure is for firms to offer narrower delivery/appointment time slots. In our survey almost half the deliveries had a time slot of five hours or more – and just 6 per cent were promised for an exact time.

In an era when the internet has sparked a huge increase in the number of home deliveries, the gap between what consumers want and what companies deliver appears wider than ever. Many companies continue to offer vague morning or afternoon time slots, and very few deliveries are made outside the hours of 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. This is despite the fact that more than 50 per cent of homes are empty between 9am and 4pm as their occupants are out at work.

Supermarkets have shown that they can consistently achieve far higher delivery standards than those revealed by our survey (see right). It is high time that other retailers (and the UK's army of workmen) raised their game to meet the needs of consumers in the 21st century.

WAITING TIME: DELIVERIES

The average number of hours consumers waited in for a delivery from some leading retailers in the last year



'IF YOU'RE OUT, YOU OWE US £80...IF WE DON'T TURN UP, WE OWE YOU NOTHING'

John Minster 72, retired

Which? member John Minster discovered that under the terms of his contract with a window-replacement company he would be charged an eye-watering £80 penalty if he cancelled an appointment

with it at less than 24 hours' notice.

John asked the firm whether it would pay him £80 if its engineer failed to turn up. It said no.

Needless to say, the engineer missed the appointment.

IF SUPERMARKETS CAN DO IT...

The performance of the delivery firms covered by our survey is abysmal compared with the service offered by the UK's online supermarkets.

When we last investigated the service they offered (*Which?*, September 2004), we found that all of the major food retailers aimed to deliver your shopping within a two-hour delivery window, with the exception of Ocado – which offered an even more impressive one-hour time slot service.

We found that 80 per cent of deliveries arrived on time, while Waitrose Deliver achieved a punctuality rate that was well in excess of 90 per cent.



Ocado: one-hour service

Checklist

How to get a better service from delivery firms and workmen – and your rights if things go wrong

■ **Be specific** Always ask if it is possible to be given a specific delivery/appointment time, or if not, request as narrow a time slot as possible to reduce unnecessary waiting time.

■ **Contract terms** If things do go wrong, you will find that your right to legal redress for long waits and missed appointments is limited. Joanne Barker, of *Which?* Legal Service, says: 'You can only claim for actual financial loss if it was a loss that was foreseeable and it was brought to the attention of the company at the time the contract was made. You cannot claim for your inconvenience or any loss of holiday if you waited in on your day off.'

■ **Self-employed** If you can prove loss of earnings as a result of a delay – for example, you are self-employed and have lost work as a result – then it may be possible to claim compensation, provided that you brought this to the attention of the company when the contract was made.

■ **Missed appointments** There are a few statutory instances where compensation is payable – British Gas, for example, has to pay £20 compensation if it breaks an appointment to read your meter. It may also pay compensation if it misses a service contract repair appointment, but it's up to you to ask for the money. Janet Wood (see p20) was so relieved to finally get her cooker fixed she didn't seek compensation.

Get in touch

We'd like to hear about your experiences of workmen and deliveries. Email your stories to letters@which.co.uk or write to us at **Letters, Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH.**