

When Time Becomes a Luxury Good

In cities where time is prized and attention is scarce, a curious marketplace has taken shape: patience for hire. If you have the cash, you don't have to queue for a cult-status bagel, a trendy restaurant, or a designer sample sale—you can outsource the wait to someone who treats standing in line like shift work.

Consider a recent sample sale for The Row in New York. Shoppers camped overnight to chase discounts that can slash luxury price tags by as much as 90%. Many never pitched a tent themselves. Robert Samuel, who runs Same Ole Line Dudes, called the fall sample-sale season his Super Bowl and doubled his 35-person staff to meet demand. At The Row's event, he says 61 of the first 80 spots belonged to his employees, each billing clients around \$25 an hour. Some standers reportedly earned up to \$800 for a single overnight wait—the going rate when scarcity meets status.

The mechanics are simple. Clients pay; professionals wait. Some work for companies like Samuel's; others find gigs through platforms such as Taskrabit. If venues allow it, standers bring tents, folding stools, portable heaters, even gaming consoles to pass the time. Regulars recognize one another the way freelancers recognize coworkers in a shared office. For clients, the math can make sense: a few hundred dollars to secure a hard-to-get reservation or a place at the front of a once-a-year sale can yield either priceless access or thousands in savings.

The practice isn't new, and it isn't only about handbags and hyped sneakers. In Communist-era Poland, the “stacz kolejkowy”—a professional line stander—emerged in response to shortages. In Washington, D.C., the tradition has long served politics: companies like Washington Express say they've been holding spots for more than four decades, charging about \$60 an hour with a three-hour minimum for congressional hearings and debates. Jennifer Goff, founder of Skip the Line, says Supreme Court oral arguments are her most lucrative bookings; clients sometimes hire teams to work in shifts for 24 to 36 hours to land one of the few coveted seats.

Demand has grown as everything from pop-ups to limited ticket releases has turned into a spectacle of patience. Taskrabit reported an 18% rise in bookings for line-standing services between late 2023 and late 2024, with average rates around \$27 per hour. The work sounds easy until the wind picks up. One stander described arriving at 6 a.m. for a limited-engagement Broadway musical on a frigid January morning and losing feeling in her face despite layering two coats, two hats, and two pairs of gloves. “Relatively easy” still requires grit.

Take Tanya, a 55-year-old New Yorker who began line-standing after her city contract ended during the pandemic. She charges \$20 an hour, typically on Friday nights and weekends, and averages three bookings a week—often for restaurants that demand in-person reservations. At Brooklyn's cult pizzeria Lucali (which saw a surge in interest after a celebrity sighting), Tanya arrives hours before the host appears, gathers her clients' preferred time windows—and backup options—and negotiates upfront. She now sets a two-hour minimum for high-demand spots; if clients won't pay for a realistic buffer, she won't promise a table. Her longest wait was

six hours for Broadway tickets; she brought a stool, a hot drink, and a playlist of upbeat hits to keep her energy up. The client met her near the front so both could buy within the two-ticket limit. Total: \$120 for the stand plus a \$50 tip.

This niche industry has its own etiquette and antagonists. At The Row, tents on the sidewalk drew scorn online—one viral video compared the scene to a homeless encampment—and a sign soon appeared banning chairs and tents. Some restaurants and venues prohibit professional stand-ins altogether. New York has moved against the gray market for restaurant reservations, requiring third-party apps to get consent before selling slots, and “Saturday Night Live” explicitly bans pay-to-skip arrangements. Navigating those rules adds another layer of logistics; Tanya says she memorizes client names and scripts to convince skeptical hosts that the booking is hers.

There’s also the fairness debate. People stuck in the “civilian” line often get irritated when they realize the queue is littered with paid placeholders. If everyone hires a stander, the argument goes, the line just becomes more expensive without becoming shorter, pushing those with less money farther back. But line-standing isn’t only a toy for the rich. Clients include journalists without press passes, advocacy groups, lawyers, out-of-towners, and people who physically can’t endure long waits. Framed another way, it’s time arbitrage: a transfer between the time-poor and the cash-poor, mediated by smartphones and a shared understanding that time is a currency like any other.

Meanwhile, the broader “skip the line” economy is expanding beyond humans holding spots. LineLeap sells fast-lane access at partner venues; credit card companies scoop up reservation apps to funnel exclusive tables to cardholders; Appointment Trader lets people buy and sell bookings; subscription services like Access charge up to \$300 a month for priority restaurant reservations. Each pushes against the idea of the queue as a neutral, first-come, first-served public good and nudges it toward a market where access can be bought, resold, and gamed.

Professional line-standing makes the trade-offs visible. For some, it’s a lifeline—steady gig income that rewards reliability and stamina. For others, it’s a reminder that even patience has become something you can outsource. Either way, the cultural message is clear: in a premium economy, the most coveted item isn’t a sweater or a seat—it’s time.

- 1) Is it fair to “rent” patience by hiring someone to wait for you?
- 2) What tasks would you gladly outsource, and what would you never outsource?
- 3) Does professional line-standing increase inequality, or does it create useful income opportunities?
- 4) Should venues be allowed to ban paid stand-ins, or should consumers be free to use them?
- 5) Would you hire a line-stander for a special meal, a court hearing, or a limited-time show?
- 6) What regulations, if any, would make this practice more ethical or transparent?

Arbitrage	(n)	taking advantage of a price or value difference to make a gain	He practiced time arbitrage by paying others to wait while he worked.
Arrangement	(n)	an agreement or plan for how something will be done	We made an arrangement to swap shifts next week.
Coveted	(adj)	greatly desired by many people	He finally landed a coveted table at the new sushi bar.
Encampment	(n)	a group of temporary shelters or tents	By dawn, the festival grounds looked like an encampment.
For hire	(phr)	available to be employed for payment	Several cyclists waited outside with bikes for hire.
Frame	(v)	present or explain something from a particular angle	She framed the delay as an opportunity to rest.
Frigid	(adj)	extremely cold	We cut the walk short in the frigid wind.
Game	(v)	manipulate a system to one's advantage by exploiting its rules	Scalpers tried to game the queueing system with bots.
Grit	(n)	courage and perseverance in the face of hardship	Finishing the marathon took grit more than speed.
Hyped	(adj)	heavily promoted and excitedly talked about	The hyped burger pop-up sold out in an hour.
Irritated	(adj)	annoyed or slightly angry	Commuters grew irritated as delays piled up.
Lifeline	(n)	something that provides crucial help or relief in a difficult situation	The weekend job became a lifeline after she was laid off.
Lucrative	(adj)	producing a lot of profit or money	She turned weekend tutoring into a lucrative side business.
Mechanic	(n)	a specific rule or method by which a system operates	The raffle's mechanic rewards early arrivals.
Mediate	(v)	act between parties to bring about an agreement	A volunteer stepped in to mediate the dispute.
Meet	(v)	satisfy a need, demand, or expectation	We increased staffing to meet weekend demand.
Outsource	(v)	obtain a service by hiring someone outside your organization to do it	The startup outsourced customer support during the holiday rush.
Pass the time	(phr v)	do something to make a long wait feel shorter	He played mobile games to pass the time on the train.
Prized	(adj)	highly valued or cherished	Her most prized possession is a faded ticket from her first concert.

Scorn	(n)	strong contempt or open criticism	The plan drew scorn from longtime customers.
Slash	(v)	reduce something drastically	The store slashed prices after the season ended.
Surge	(n)	a sudden strong increase	There was a surge in orders after the ad went viral.
Take shape	(phr v)	begin to form and become more organized or clear	Our travel plan finally took shape after we booked the flights.
Treat	(v)	regard or consider in a particular way	They treat time like a budget that must be managed carefully.
Upfront	(adv)	paid or done in advance	Vendors require half the fee upfront.

ALPHA+