

Sassy, zany and easy-going—the abundance of fun in digital help

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In the future, humans will interact more and more with automated help. Whether it's smart home hardware or chatbots, digital interfaces and virtual assistants rely on conversation for interaction and instruction.

The designers of such systems must confront questions regarding the

platform's voice or the bot's personality – in other words, how to find the right balance between friendliness and impersonality, humour and seriousness, pleasure and friction.

This is an issue I touched on in a [recent article](#) that showcases some recent theories about the trend towards leisure and play as culturally organising forces in wealthy, western democracies.

This trend has led to distinctive sets of conditions for service industry labour, whether the help is digital or human.

What is tone?

When conversation is the medium through which interactions take place, tone is arguably the defining element that determines character, and therefore brand identity. Apple's voice assistant Siri is [already known](#) for its sass.

Tone is notoriously tricky to define. In the field of literary criticism, efforts have ranged from I. A. Richard's straightforward notion of a speaker's "[attitude to his listener](#)", to Sianne Ngai's more [recent interpretation](#), which emphasises the importance of feeling and mood.

After World War II, America had great success [exporting its customer-friendly service culture](#) across the world. People in wealthy democracies increasingly expect service with a smile, a cheerful disposition, and a can-do attitude.

These expectations are no different in the world of automated help. The teams of writers that work Google's various digital helpers aim to construct an "easygoing, friendly" personality through automatically generated dialogue in response to [user queries](#).

Humour and a sense of fun is a key element in the transactions on which service industry labour depends. However, expectations of constant humour and playfulness have the potential to create peculiar hybrids of the fun and the unfun.

When 'zany' falls down

The relationship between service industry labour, customer friendliness and the complexity and limitations of human emotions is compellingly illustrated in director Ben Stiller's 1996 film [The Cable Guy](#). Professor of English [Sianne Ngai](#) refers to the movie as an example of zaniness in her work on [minor aesthetic categories](#).

Unlike the beautiful, which provokes more straightforwardly positive responses, the zany is an aesthetic category characterised by feelings that are ambivalent and not always agreeable.

In this film, Chip Douglas (played by Jim Carrey), a self-employed cable installer, is recommended to the protagonist, Steven M. Kovacs (Matthew Broderick), and offers a great deal on illegal cable.

Douglas' work combines two elements: the interpersonal skills required as he enters the domestic environments to install and repair cable for his clients, and the abstract, impersonal cable network itself.

The film dramatises the potential misreadings between the anonymity we desire as clients or customers in such a context, and the emphasis on friendliness and personal intimacy, which increasingly characterise the delivery of services.

The example of Douglas illustrates what happens when there is a mismatch between an upbeat tone, and the typical stresses and ennui that come with the demands and routine of work. Ngai identifies this volatile

combination of the fun and the "unfun" in the context of work as a key feature of the zany.

Ngai's characterises Douglas as a "living version of Facebook", who works fervently and fails spectacularly to keep Kovacs connected to friends and emotionally upbeat.

This is very relevant to recent developments in digital help.

Digital zaniness

The designers and engineers of digital help face interesting questions regarding how they negotiate the balance between superhuman ambitions and the inevitable imperfections that accompany technology.

The emphasis on fun, easygoing attitudes, relentless positivity and a limitless capacity to perform is an ideal context for zaniness to thrive. In addition to knowing everything and making daily transactions seamlessly convenient, there is a growing expectation for bots to be a perpetual Christmas cracker, delivering punchline after punchline.

[David Chen's experiment](#) asking Google Home to tell him jokes for 15 minutes straight seems to herald a grim sub-genre, where interactions with digital help reflect some of the less beneficial aspects of human psychology.

There is no strategy more likely to deaden the impact of humour than insisting on or inviting its use as the standard lubrication for interactions. The more bite-sized rhetorical manoeuvres, such as the quip, can very quickly become an unfunny routine, particularly if they are delivered in the broader context of interactive assistance.

The ease with which we can access massive amounts of diverse

knowledge in networked culture has already created its own peculiar conventions and psycho-social phenomena. If "Google it" becomes a phrase used in the context of generating humour as much as trivial knowledge, then we can expect both humour and the world to change as a consequence.

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