

People hate phone menus and don't trust virtual assistants like Siri

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"Just thinking about it makes me break out into hives" reported one man in his 60's. A woman in her 30's said she does everything she can to

avoid it, including pretending she doesn't speak English. A woman in her 20's said she'll do an intensive online search, including blogs, websites and forums, to find others struggling with the same problem so she feels "less alone."

No, we're not describing some terrible social encounter or anxiety-provoking health condition. These are examples of how, in our recent nationwide survey and series of interviews, [people](#) described dealing with [customer service](#) to get help concerning a product or a service.

For the most part, this negative response was based primarily on experiences with [interactive voice response](#) systems (IVRs), or "robo-calls," as one interviewee described them. Interactive voice response systems are those automated menus, prompts and directories that initially answer so many of today's customer service phone calls. They require us either to press a series of buttons or speak certain keywords to direct the call. We found IVRs are the most common interface for starting customer service journeys – half our respondents' "most recent" customer service experiences began with IVRs. And, surprise, surprise, they're among the least-liked automated formats for customer service.

Our work follows up on a study led by our colleague [James E. Katz](#) nearly 20 years ago that detailed how [people reacted to IVR technology at that time](#). In the intervening years, there've been surprisingly few studies published on how users now negotiate the dramatic proliferation of communication modalities available for customer service. Outside of proprietary market research, we don't know that much about users' feelings concerning the increasing prevalence of voice-activated communication with computers, phones and similar devices. One of our goals was to fill in knowledge gaps about this burgeoning – and for most, irritating – area of media activity.



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

Almost nobody likes dealing with IVRs

Our survey, funded by the industry group [Interactions](#), sampled 1,321 online respondents who were demographically matched to the overall U.S. population. In addition, we conducted 50 in-depth followup interviews and three focus groups to get a better understanding of the patterns in the survey data.

At the beginning of a customer service experience, 90 percent of our respondents want to speak to a live agent. And no matter how their customer service journey starts – with IVR, email, [instant messaging](#), automated chat, virtual assistants (like Siri and similar voice-controlled mobile apps) or social media – by the end, 83 percent have reached a real, live person. Much as Katz and his colleagues saw in 1997,

individuals still overwhelmingly want to deal with a human being rather than a machine. If it doesn't work easily for them, people do what it takes – within what the system permits – to circumvent automated customer service.

When we asked respondents their opinions about IVRs being the most common entrée to customer service help, the results were almost uniformly negative. Only 10 percent were satisfied with their experience and approximately 35 percent of respondents found the systems difficult to use. Just 3 percent actually *liked* using the IVR service.

These results did not vary appreciably across gender, but younger individuals tended to rate their most recent IVR experience more favorably than older respondents did.

Other automated modes for customer service

The general opinions of these various automated modalities for customer service ranged considerably on a four-point scale from "miserable" to "excellent." On average, virtual assistants such as [Siri, Cortana, Alexa](#) or similar voice-controlled mobile applications performed the worst in the eyes of customers. Their average ranking was just above unsatisfactory, with 19 percent rating them "miserable." Accessed via voice-activated mobile phone apps, these virtual assistants are [becoming more common](#).

Of the nonhuman mediated interfaces, email and instant messaging were best received. They ranked behind only in-person customer service and live customer service agents on the phone, which had average rankings greater than "satisfactory" but less than "excellent."

People's preference to deal with human customer service agents seems to come down at least partly to trust. Live agents scored an average trust level midway between "some" and "a lot" on a four-point scale.

Respondents told us they're confident a real person will "see it through" and they feel more assured that "the call won't just end" without some sort of resolution. They know they'll at least have an answer by the end of the call – even if it's not the one they want to hear. Social media and [virtual assistants](#) (such as Siri) were least trusted, with 35 percent and 29 percent of users reporting having no faith in those interfaces, respectively.

What goes wrong?

An overwhelming majority reported of respondents problems using IVRs.

Part of the reason IVRs and automated speech recognition platforms are so disliked is that consumers must repeat themselves often when using them. Sixty-nine percent of consumers "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that IVRs make it hard to describe the problem that they're calling about, and 75 percent "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that IVRs forced them to listen to irrelevant options. Similar percentages thought IVRs present choices that lead nowhere and so achieve nothing, that IVRs have too many menus, and that the prompts used in IVRs are too long.

People also consistently reported their frustration with the robot's (in)ability to understand them and the need to repeat the same information many times during the interaction without making progress. People still just want to get to a live agent. Overall, respondents reported feeling like the IVR robot is "dragging out the conversation" and forcing them to pick from prompts that don't really fit their problem. All of this leaves consumers "feel[ing] like I'm being managed," as one woman described it.

Interestingly, people had strong emotional responses to these experiences. They reported fear about not understanding the prompts or

pressing the wrong button, anger and frustration when the IVRs do not lead them to the right place, and an overwhelming sense of stress in general.

Computer voices distant second to the real deal

Obviously, [speech is an integral part of being human](#). We're extremely adept at picking up on its social aspects, and can easily distinguish between a voice that is human and one that is synthetic. Our inherent responses to computerized voices are different than to live voices, which influences the level of comfort or frustration we feel with IVR.

Previous research has found that a [mismatch or incongruities](#) between apparent emotion or delivery of a message and its content make people uncomfortable. This might be one cause for IVR users' discomfort, but likely is only the tip of the iceberg.

In general, people also become uncomfortable and rate the helpfulness of an IVR lower [when synthetic voices refer to themselves as "I."](#) People are unconsciously discomfitted when the pronoun "I" is ascribed to anything not fully human that possesses agency.

Perceived gender of the voice can also influence how people react to IVR technology. Because of a natural tendency to treat technology socially, people [automatically assign gendered stereotypes](#) to a voice. Indeed, others have argued that so many personal digital assistants like Siri and Cortana have [female voices and names because](#) people tend to find them more pleasant and helpful. Male voices, on the other hand, have been rated as more authoritative and contribute to higher perceptions of the usability of the service.

Rise of the bots

Our survey [respondents](#) held relatively innovative attitudes towards technology and were not especially apprehensive about communication. Even so, exactly half reported feeling that the use of IVRs shows "machines are taking over." One woman in her 20's said "it annoys me that the company thinks they can do [customer service] with a robot." And a woman in her 70's reported quite succinctly that "if I want to talk to a machine, I'll yell at my computer."

In this environment, we were surprised to find instant messaging had the highest favorability and trust rankings of any mediated customer service system, even email. People told us they love the synchronous nature of this communication – they can see that someone is ostensibly typing or working on their answer in real time. Respondents liked that they can simultaneously multitask, so don't feel they've been put on hold. And they don't have to engage in fake pleasantries during the interaction.

Person-to-person communication remains hard to beat. Instant messaging platforms allow the person seeking support to interact in real time with someone capable of understanding human expression *accurately* and *quickly*. One woman reported loving that she can "just type" her questions and "receive an immediate response." Many echoed this sentiment, and also appreciated having a written log of the conversation as well, things that technology enhances rather than diminishes in this modality.

One of the most interesting findings from our interviews and focus groups was that lots of people initiate live-chat with a company while on hold or dealing with the IVR. In essence, live-chat has become a workaround to the robot roadblocks people confront on the phone.

The fact that instant messaging ranked so highly demonstrates that consumers are open to using technology to improve customer service because it is faster and more immediate. But they'll intentionally seek

out platforms that provide detailed and personalized responses to complex questions in real time that minimize time costs, communication errors and frustration.

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