

Man vs. machine

In the age of automated customer service, can you still be treated like a person?

By [Kathleen Pierce](#)

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The technological advances in our do-it-yourself society enable customers to order almost anything, anytime, with a few clicks of a mouse. They can tweet the cable company, e-mail their wireless carrier, and have a live chat with their bank around the clock. But when a real crisis hits, where's the human help?

As companies automate services, it seems harder and harder to get treated like a person. Phones are answered by interactive voice response systems, e-mails by robots. Sometimes, no matter how many buttons you push in the loop of phone menus, you still wind up at "Push '1' for English."

But it's still possible to reclaim human dignity in this age of machines, say customer service specialists. In some cases, it's a matter of remaining calm and patient. In others, it's cracking the button-pushing code that gets you to a person. In still other situations, it can require shouting and swearing until the #\$\$&&@# computer-generated voice patches you through to a human.

"If you are paying for [something], you should receive a high level of service, not be made to feel like one more person waiting in a queue," said Adam Goldkamp, chief operations officer of [GetHuman.com](#), a Boston-based website that helps consumers

navigate customer service at 2,200 companies. “It’s startling when big companies fall off and you no longer get what you pay for. You feel cheated.”

[GetHuman.com](#) was founded on the principle that when things go awry, people need to talk to people. The site ranks the quality and service of popular companies and provides shortcuts to get through to human beings. For example, to get through the United Air lines automated system, the site instructs users to ignore the automated voice and press 0 at each prompt three times.

“The customer support security blanket is still the phone,” said Goldkamp. “This is what people were complaining about. They said, ‘Just give me a number — I have to talk to a person.’ ”

Susan Ausiello of Wellesley usually does business online, but last week, while switching her phone service to [Comcast](#), she needed to talk to a person. Over the course of three hours and two days her order was canceled out of the system and her phone plan set up at the wrong number.

As a senior vice president and sales manager of Coldwell Banker in Wellesley, Ausiello stresses responsiveness to her 60 sales associates. “It doesn’t matter how much you know if you don’t deliver good customer service,” she said.

Doreen Vigue, a Comcast spokeswoman, said the company has spent \$2 billion over the past few years beefing up customer service with a 24-hour phone network and digital team. Ausiello’s experience “is not one we want to replicate for any customer,” Vigue wrote in an e-mail. “We’ve dedicated

significant resources to improving our service and are encouraged by the progress we're making.”

Comcast gets high marks from customer service specialists for its use of Twitter. Its handle [@ComcastCares](#) is monitored by a team that scans the Twittersverse for company mentions and responds quickly if the hashtag ([#Comcast](#)) is used.

Indianapolis social media consultant Erik Deckers, says using Facebook or Twitter to lodge a complaint is an effective way to get a company's attention. Instead of being a one-on-one event, it becomes a marketing tool for businesses to demonstrate their prowess.

“The forward-thinking companies,” Deckers said, “are starting to see that if they can resolve a complaint publicly, they are not only addressing it, they are resolving it in front of an audience.”

In many ways, technology has meant dramatically better service for customers, said Micah Solomon, a Philadelphia business consultant whose book, “Exceptional Service, Exceptional Profit: The Secrets of Building a Five-Star Customer Service Organization,” profiles companies that treat customers right. For example, he noted, “You can order anything in the universe at 7:59 p.m. and [Amazon](#) will have it the next day and if you don't like it, you can return it without getting the beady eye.”

But the softer side of customer service, the human touch, has deteriorated, he said. Still, there are ways to get personal attention.

If you are stuck in a labyrinth of recordings, try screaming or

swearing, suggests Christian Allen, chief technical officer of [GetHuman.com](#). Some systems use emotion-gauging software to recognize profanities and the increasing volume of voices, and switch frustrated customers to live representatives.

Once you do get a human, said Solomon, treat the voice on the other end of the line with respect, and your chances of resolving the problem will improve. “The number one most useful question to ask,” Solomon said, “is ‘I know these things can happen. What would you do if you were in my shoes?’ ”

[Netflix](#) is one company that discovered the value of personal attention. For many years, customers couldn’t find a phone number on the movie subscription service’s website.

But as the company’s growth ballooned, Netflix abandoned its Web-only customer service approach, and opened a call center in Oregon in 2006.

“It was a pretty dramatic reversal of strategy,” said Steve Swasey, vice president of corporate communications for the California firm. “But every now and then someone needs the high-touch of a person.”