

Opinions

Please, just pick up the phone

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We live in a mobile world, but sometimes all that work is just exhausting.



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Last year, a friend of mine called me, panicked because she was worried about her Caribbean vacation destination in the aftermath of the hurricanes.

Was the resort still open? Was it safe to fly via Puerto Rico? What would happen if she and her husband were there and another storm hit?

She was frantically checking every website, every Facebook post and TripAdvisor review, frustrated because she couldn't get a straight answer. In the end, she ended up cancelling the reservation, demanding money back from the resort and booking somewhere else.

Her original resort was fine. Her flights wouldn't have been cancelled. The resort had to refund her booking—business they really needed, given the time—to make the customer happy.

And all of this could have been avoided if she would have just taken my advice and picked up the phone to call the resort (instead of calling me!) and talk to a real, live person who could have answered all her questions.

But no—nobody ever wants to pick up the phone or talk to a real person anymore, I've noticed.

Pardon me while I get on my Andy Rooney curmudgeon soapbox, but tell me you haven't noticed this, too! I see people around me every day who would conduct 100% of their lives online if they could, from doing work to ordering food to socializing with friends.

It's the same with travel and hotels: people want to book online (then complain when they mess up connections or accommodations). They don't want to talk to anyone at the actual hotel. But then they complain, on Twitter of course, if there aren't enough towels or the room is crappy.

I don't really understand why. Are people afraid of language barriers? Or are they afraid of sounding dumb when they ask questions? (Great, now I'm thinking back on all the times I've asked idiotic questions over the phone, or worse—had way more confidence in my Spanish or French than was warranted.)

It's a trend that's tough on hotels and other service industries, which for eons have built their business model on, well, hospitality. And now they have to adapt it to accommodate people who want nothing to do with the face-to-face interactions of hospitality, yet do want all the good results from it, like extra towels and great dinner recommendations.

It's a tough balance to achieve. As a result, we see it settle along predictable lines. Older, wealthier people who go to luxury hotels want face-to-face hospitality. Younger people seem to want to look, book, unlock and do everything else from the safety of their phone. A dinner recommendation from the front desk? Oh, hell no; that's what Yelp is for.

Hotels now have to figure out how to reach all their customers where they want to be reached and how they want that interaction. This is a tough job, and it's not going to work for everyone. My prediction is the people who want face-to-face hospitality in real time are the ones who are going to lose out, especially given a tough labor environment.

Hotels and hotel companies are investing in tech-enabled service automation all over the place, and this isn't going to slow down. (For an example of this trend, read Bryan Wroten's [profile of a hotel in Nashville](#) that has eliminated its front desk and switched to check-in and check-out by text.)

I'm not convinced that the middle ground of people who want a lot of tech automation, but still the option for in-person service, is sustainable.

But for now, while there are still people at hotel front desks and in reservation centers to call, I'm calling them when I have a question.

How are you dealing with the logistics of balancing in-person and automated service? Comment below, email me at sricca@hotelnewsnow.com or find me on Twitter [@HNN_Steph](#).

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