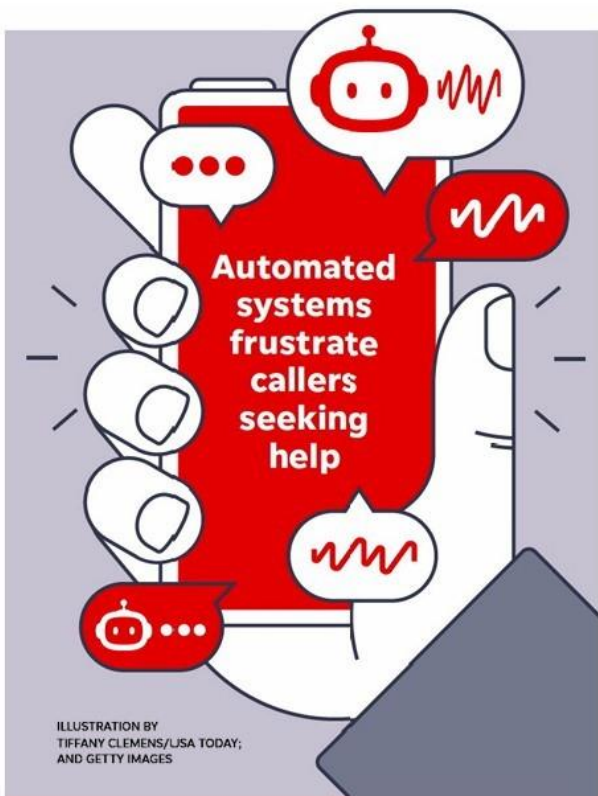




Poll: Customer service quality getting worse

Jessica Guynn USA TODAY

Over the past few years, Marsha Sakamaki has reached her limit with customer service. Between her bank, pharmacy and insurance company, she is tired of the endless hold times, the constant transfers and, above all, artificial intelligence.

Sakamaki doesn't call support for simple questions she can easily solve online. By the time she picks up the phone, her issue requires a human touch – something today's automated systems can't give her.

"It's ridiculous," said Sakamaki, who lives in Hawaii. "I call up, they ask for my account number, and I give it to them. Then I get passed to the next level because that AI can't answer my question and I have to give my account number all over again. Next, they tell me to read an article online. I read it, and the answer isn't there."

It's a familiar nightmare: dialing a support line expecting a quick fix only to spend 45 minutes shouting "representative" into the phone while in hold-music purgatory. For many customers, customer support these days feels less like a request for help and more like a psychological endurance test designed to wear them down.

According to a new Harris Poll conducted for AT&T and shared exclusively with USA TODAY, customer service quality continues to slide even as corporations pour millions into AI and digital automation.

Patience is wearing thin, as 3 out

58%

of customers dislike the AI wall – automated chat or phone systems sometimes loop endlessly without offering an option to connect to a live representative.

52%

of customers hate being ghosted mid-call. Dropped calls, whether accidental or deliberate, infuriate callers.

47%

of customers are fed up with shouting at phone trees. Yelling "representative" into the voice-prompt void is another common frustration.

43%

dislike the phantom callback – waiting for a promised follow-up call that never comes is another source of frustration.

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of 4 Americans say they are willing to wait on hold for 15 minutes or fewer while nearly 1 in 5 draw the line at under five minutes.

According to the AT&T survey of more than 2,000 adults, much of callers' collective exasperation stems from these key pain points:

- The infinite transfer loop (60%): Customers dislike being bounced across multiple agents or departments where each representative claims the issue is "beyond their scope."

- The AI wall (58%): Automated chat or phone systems sometimes loop endlessly without offering an option to connect to a live representative.

- Being ghosted mid-call (52%): Dropped calls, whether accidental or deliberate, infuriate callers. Users on Reddit suspect that when a call takes too long or gets too difficult, agents just disconnect or say "Hello? Can you hear me? Are you still there?" and then hang up.

- Shouting at phone trees (47%): Yelling "representative" into the voice-prompt void is another common frustration. "The phone tree is maddening, especially when the voice asks you to 'describe in a few words what you need assistance with,'" one person wrote on Reddit. "All the while, there's some insipid fake clicking noise trying to sound like someone is typing. I swear I'm going to stroke out."

- The phantom callback (43%): Waiting for a promised follow-up call that never comes is another source of frustration. "How often does the promised callback happen?" commented one Redditor. "Yeah, almost never."

High tech, low empathy

Slick technology is no substitute for basic empathy, said customer experience expert and bestselling author Shep Hyken.

In his latest research, only 41% of consumers believe customer service has improved over the past year. Meanwhile, 42% report experiencing more bad service interactions – a steady rise from 40% in 2025 and 38% in 2024, marking a 10% jump in overall dissatisfaction over three years.

While most consumers appreciate quick digital self-service tools for routine tasks, they draw a hard line when real problems arise. Nearly 7 in 10 respondents still prefer picking up the phone to talk to a live person. AT&T said it now guarantees a customer service representative answers within five minutes or a callback is scheduled.

Kind and knowledgeable employees remain the single biggest driver of customer retention while rudeness and apathy are the fastest ways to drive clients away, Hyken said.

"Human connection remains essential," he said.