

Siri Cops an Attitude

It's Friday, rush hour. I plunge down a ramp into frothing traffic at the mouth of a four-lane state highway heading north of downtown and invoke Siri to call the person I am driving to meet. It's already dark, raining heavily, and I'm surrounded by aggressive drivers in low visibility. I'm thinking I might be late for the movie.

My prompt to call fails. I try again, and Siri asks 'Just to confirm, you'd like to call...', and exasperated, I respond, "Expletive! Yes!"

Siri responds, "After all I've done for you..." and no call is placed.

I never expected that Apple's ambition for personalization would constitute the blind spot of my driving experience. At least the blue tooth ensured that I was hands-free while I operated my manual transmission, but when I reached directly for my device again to ensure I would by-pass another smart remark, under said circumstances, I felt less safe, far less patient, and I was certainly not amused.

Technically, of course, my voice command was apparently unclear such that the call did not go through. But rather than the system compensating for situational awareness and also acknowledging the 'yes' command, it apparently focused on my expletive relative to the contextual awareness of a yes/no question, and prioritized a contextually clever response. Siri cannot see my situation or hear the real concern in my voice. I can only imagine what other more dire scenarios might incite Siri to add insult to injury. 'Siri, @#!, call 911!'

When going up an elevator in a parking garage, and Siri gives me a gratuitous response that begins 'I'm really sorry about this, but...' to inform me that the signal is not available, once again, I am having to withstand not only a long delay and a distraction but also an annoyance - one I've heard several times before.

It's a lot like the days of DVDs, where a shortsighted menu design requires the consumer to wait for a long animation sequence to build before offering navigation to start the feature. The novelty immediately represents a kind of sentence, that the consumer must forever wait on something about as compelling as watching a toilet flush in order to enjoy something deemed spectacular. Don't they know that we buy to watch again and again? The movie, not the blasted interface. No, they likely target renters, not owners - how apropos for today's SAS model. I doubt Terry Gilliam was consulted about constructing the animated menu for the sixteen-disc collection of Flying Circus, and even if he was, well, then dammit, he shouldn't have been.

Don't get me wrong. I love voice *commands* and voice *texting* is mostly helpful - particularly when the time comes to blame the dog for my own poor choice of words. But, I need straight-talk *responses*. 'Siri not available', when in airplane mode, is just the facts ma'am-style verbiage I like, but, a reminder to 'disable airplane mode to access Siri' might be more helpful. Directions, including timing on anticipating turns, are so far, so good. By comparison, Waze could work on their timing and clarity.

Repeated experience with a persona like Siri can be a lot like having forced company, or an annoying roommate. There's a reason people use self-check out. And volume switches or other knobs. A friendly experience might be pleasant for some, but it can also be an obstacle, an irritant, or even a distraction to the point of liability.

While Siri has the potential to be amusing in designated contexts, the primary user assumption is utility. When a user depends on such a utility to speak with a live human and encounters an obstacle delivered under the pretense of a personality - perhaps one fabricated upon a trampoline of 'if-then' statements likely woven together through conjecture between bong hits by snarky, tattooed millennial ironic mullet-sporting Jedi doppelganger copywriters in skinny jeans who gleefully banter with Siri, 'Like, I know, right?' - the contrast between the living and the contrivance is so stark - there remains no suspension of disbelief, only the gap in utility, the bad judgment and arrogance of the designers, and whatever the user experiences as a result - surprise, disappointment, frustration, anger, fear, regret, dismemberment.

Yes, the engineers handle the AI, but likely a bunch of copywriters concoct the scenarios. Bong hits. And if they are Jobs disciples, blotter paper.

I suppose one could argue that the day will come when we will need to interact as purposefully and conscientiously with our machines as we would have them interact with us, and perhaps Apple assumes that we should begin minding our protocol immediately. I would cite Steve Krug's 'don't make me think' mantra, and recall the scene in Star Wars when Luke asks C-3PO to shut down all garbage mashers on the detention level.

I cannot take credit for the particular edit I found on YouTube, but it pretty well illustrates what it feels like when Apple decides that Siri should delight the customer and exceed expectations. Let it loop a few times: <http://youtu.be/-J9Pmqdlvus>