

## **Oh, for the good old days of rude cellphone gabbers**

*Nick Wingfield*

*Is talking to a phone the same as talking on it?*

The sound of someone gabbing on a cellphone is part of the soundtrack of daily life, and most of us have learned when to be quiet — no talking in “quiet cars” on trains, for example.

But the etiquette of talking to a phone — more precisely, to a “virtual assistant” like Apple’s Siri, in the new iPhone 4S — has not yet evolved. And eavesdroppers are becoming annoyed.

In part, that is because conversations with machines have a robotic, unsettling quality. Then there is the matter of punctuation. If you want it, you have to say it.

“How is he doing question mark how are you doing question mark,” Jeremy Littau of Bethlehem, Pa., found himself telling his new iPhone recently as he walked down the street, dictating a text message to his wife, who was home with their newborn. The machine spoke to him in Siri’s synthesized female voice.

Passers-by gawked. “It’s not normal human behavior to have people having a conversation with a phone on the street,” concluded Mr. Littau, 36, an assistant professor of journalism and communication at Lehigh University.

The technology behind voice-activated mobile phones has been around for a few years — allowing people to order their phones around like digital factotums, commanding them to dictate text messages, jot down appointments on their calendars and search for nearby sushi restaurants. Apple, though, has taken it to another level with Siri.

“Happy birthday smiley face,” was what Dani Klein heard a man say to his phone on the Long Island Rail Road, using the command to insert a grinning emoticon into a message.

“It sounded ridiculous,” said Mr. Klein, 28, who works in social media marketing.

Talking to your phone is so new that there are no official rules yet on, say, public transportation systems.

Cliff Cole, a spokesman for Amtrak, said the train line’s quiet-car policy applied to any use of voice with cellphones, though it explicitly bans only “phone calls,” not banter with a virtual assistant. “We may have to adjust the language if it becomes a problem,” Mr. Cole said.

Voice-activated technology in smartphones first appeared a few years ago when mobile phones running Google’s Android operating system and other software began offering basic voice commands to do Web searches and other tasks. Apple’s Siri, introduced this fall, is a more sophisticated iteration of the technology; it responds to natural-sounding phrases like, “What’s the weather looking like?” and “Wake me up at 8 a.m.”

Apple gave Siri a dash of personality, too, reinforcing the impression that the iPhone’s users were actually talking to someone. Ask Siri for the meaning of life, and it responds, “I find it odd you would ask this of an inanimate object.”

Technology executives say voice technologies are here to stay if only because they can help cellphone users be more productive.

“I don’t think the keyboard is going to go away, but it’s going to be less used,” said Martin Cooper, who developed the first portable cellular phone while at Motorola in the 1970s.

Another irritant in listening to people talk to their phones is the awareness that most everything you can do with voice commands can also be done silently. Billy Brooks, 43, was

standing in line at the service department of a car dealership in Los Angeles recently, when a woman broke the silence of the room by dictating a text message into her iPhone.

"You're unnecessarily annoying others at that point by not just typing out your message," said Mr. Brooks, a visual effects artist in the film industry, adding that the woman's behavior was "just ridiculous and kind of sad."

James E. Katz, director of the Center for Mobile Communication Studies at Rutgers, said people who use their voices to control their phones are creating an inconvenience for others — noise — rather than coping with an inconvenience for themselves — the discomfort of having to type slowly on a cramped cellphone keyboard. Mr. Katz compared the behavior with that of someone who leaves a car's engine running while parked, creating noise and fumes for people surrounding them.

While Apple has tried to enable natural-sounding conversations with Siri, they are often anything but. Nirav Tolia, an Internet entrepreneur, was riding a crowded elevator down from his office in San Francisco recently when a man tried to use Siri to find a new location of a cafe, Coffee Bar. The phone gave him listings for other coffee houses — the wrong ones — forcing him to repeat the search several times.

"Just say 'Starbucks,' dude," another passenger said, pushing past the Coffee Bar-seeker when the elevator reached the ground floor.

When talking to their cellphones, people sometimes start sounding like machines themselves. Jimmy Wong, 24, was at an after-hours diner with friends in Los Angeles recently when they found themselves next to a man ordering Siri to write memos and dictate e-mails. They found the man's conversation with his phone "creepy," without any of the natural pauses and voice inflections that occur in a discussion between two people.

"It was very robotic," he said.

Yet the group could not stop eavesdropping.

People who study the behavior of cellphone users believe the awkwardness of hearing people in hotels, airports and cafes treating their phones like administrative assistants will simply fade over time.

"We'll see an evolution of that initial irritation with it, to a New Yorker cartoon making fun of it, and then after a while it will largely be accepted by most people," said Mr. Katz from Rutgers.

But, he predicted, "there will be a small minority of traditionalists who yearn for the good old days when people just texted in public."

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