PolyAI

BUYERS' GUIDE

Guest-led voice assistants for restaurants
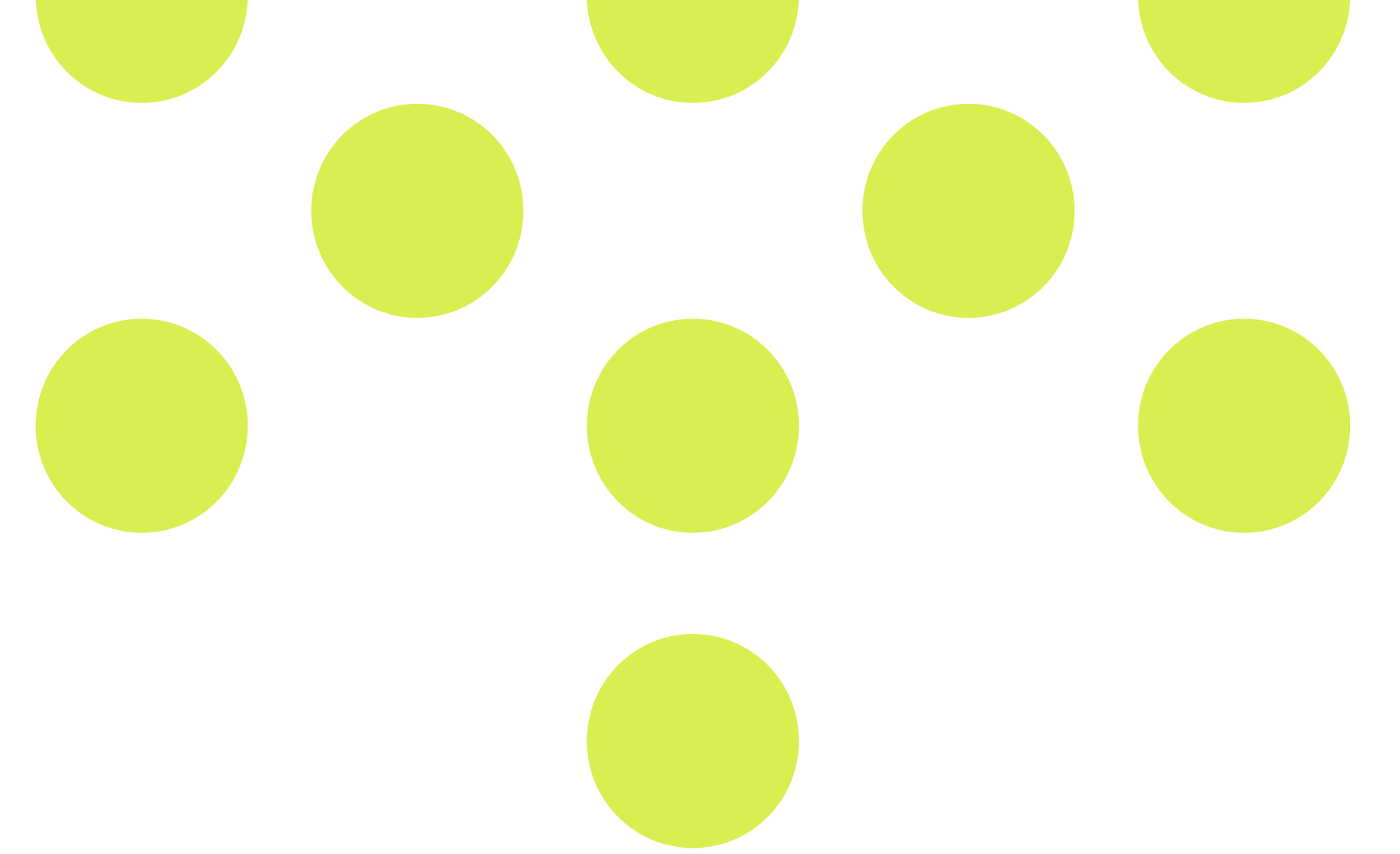
The definitive buying guide for reservations teams

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Most restaurants miss a significant portion of phone calls. On-site staff are typically too busy helping the guests in front of them to pick up the phone, and when they do, they're not always able to give the caller their full attention.

Many restaurants have invested heavily in digital booking systems and apps to reduce pressure on the phone channel. But guests are still calling.

It's a hard habit to break, and many diners still rely on the convenience of picking up the phone to make a reservation on the go, check for specific information like parking and outside seating, or to modify a reservation due to a last minute change to the number of guests.

Many big restaurant groups have invested in outsourced call centers or building in-house central reservation teams to handle phone calls. But this is an expensive option, eating into already overstretched budgets.

But times are changing, and a new generation of voice assistants promises to answer 100% of restaurant phone calls 24/7/365, ensuring that restaurants never have to miss another call.

While technology has improved drastically, deciding who to work with is harder than ever. With thousands of vendors now touting conversational AI platforms, restaurants are tasked with the unenviable job of sorting through various offerings and choosing a solution that will best solve their problems.

It's a big decision, one that can make or break the guest experience and interactions with a guest's favorite venue. Those who don't implement voice AI now face lagging behind the competition, while those who jump in head first risk investing significantly in something that actively damages brand experience.

But choosing the right solution eliminates these risks. In this guide, we'll uncover the different types of voice AI solutions available to restaurants and explain how you can leverage voice technology to level up your phone experience to match your dining one.

1. What digital experience initiatives are restaurants focusing on?

Leading restaurants are developing digital experiences that live up to the on-site experiences their businesses were created to deliver.

The goal is to create a holistic brand experience from the point of booking right through to paying the cheque.

Here's what those restaurants are thinking about.

Balancing ROI with CX	Data-driven optimization	AI joins the team	Guest-led personalization
Restaurants are using digital channels and the phone to deliver on-brand experiences off-site, building a base of loyal guests.	Restaurants are leveraging guest data to optimize bookings.	Restaurants are investing in AI to streamline operations so that busy in-house staff and centralized teams never miss a booking opportunity again.	Restaurants are upping the personalization game to create upsell opportunities that guests love.

2. How are restaurants creating value with voice assistants?

Voice assistants can create value in a number of ways. Restaurants are thinking about the following value drivers when building a case to buy.

Increased capacity

Voice assistants fully or partially automate calls without the guest needing to speak to a person.

Never leave guests waiting on hold.

Automate outbound confirmation calls to avoid costly empty seats.

Modify or cancel bookings so every dropout is automatically available again in your inventory.

Revenue gain

By answering 100% of calls, voice assistants ensure companies don't miss reservations.

Process payments over the phone.

Don't risk guests going to the competition.

Voice assistants always remember to upsell special offers.

Operational excellence

Voice assistants surface actionable insights that drive operational improvements in guest service and the wider business.

Use insights into excess demand and table layout to optimize your operations (no more turning guests away unnecessarily), and uncover new marketing opportunities.

Improved CX

Having a voice assistant handling common call types reduces wait times for every guest and frees up your people to focus on the guests who need them most.

Deliver a better in-house experience where staff have the ability to give guests their full attention.

Improved employee experience

Staff can focus on tables and feel less rushed, providing a better work environment for them and a better experience for the guest.

Staff can cater and prepare for specific requirements and dietary requests before the guests arrive.

3. What should a restaurant voice assistant be capable of?

Here are some of the most common use cases for restaurant voice assistants.

Site-specific FAQs
Give on-brand responses to site-specific FAQs like opening times and parking.

Offer promotions over the phone
Launch special offers and personalized rewards over the phone.

Bookings
Take, amend and cancel reservations through natural conversations.

First-party data
Gain insight into excess demand and table layout to optimize your operations.

Payments
Take credit card payments securely.

Call routing
Accurately understand guest needs and route calls to the right place.

Multichannel
Communicate with guests by phone, SMS, Facebook Messenger, or WhatsApp.

Personalization
Offer a personalized service, including recommendations for repeat guests.

Multilingual support
Deliver consistent experiences for every guest, no matter what language they speak.

Out of hours reservations
Answer every call, even out of hours, with no staff needed.

4. What automation options do restaurants have?

With seemingly endless categories of technology – all making similar promises about reducing call volume, improving CX, and cutting costs – it can be difficult to make future-proof technology decisions that translate into guest and operational benefits.

When it comes to creating voice experiences that keep guests engaged, not all solutions are best placed to meet restaurants' needs. Here, we explore some of the options.

	Keypad IVR	Conversational IVR	Agent assist	Conversational AI platforms	Guest-led voice assistants
Description	Press 1 for this Press 2 for that	Please tell me in a few words why you're calling	Listens to the conversation and pulls relevant information up on agent dashboard	Build your own chatbot	An automated system that sounds like your best people
Limitations	Keypad IVRs restrict callers to limited options and are often bypassed because callers feel unable to match their complex queries to simple IVR options. Guests need to share more details due to the varied nature of inquiries.	Conversational IVRs sound robotic and force callers to guess which keywords will trigger the appropriate response. What about when guests need to explain it's a family member's birthday and they'd like to arrange something special?	Agent assist makes it easier for agents to handle calls but does nothing to reduce call volume.	Conversational AI platforms allow organizations to build voice assistants from scratch, but they are generic, require additional services, and deliver poor guest experiences.	Guest-led voice assistants are the only solution that allows callers to speak however they like to get the level of support they deserve.

5. Guest-led voice assistants: A deep dive

When launching a voice assistant for guest care use cases, experience is critical. If a guest does not feel comfortable engaging with the solution, they will insist on talking to a person, offsetting the benefits of automation.

The most effective voice assistants for restaurants are guest-led. This means they put callers in the driver's seat.

Speaking to a guest-led voice assistant feels like speaking to a real person. Callers can speak naturally, interrupt, ask questions, and dive in and out of different topics.

Legacy voice technologies have made people wary of engaging with restrictive, keyword-based bots that open with, "Please tell me in a few words why you are calling." Those experiences make callers feel constricted and neglected. Callers are often misunderstood and become increasingly frustrated.

To deliver genuinely helpful support, voice assistants must earn the caller's trust. This means understanding callers, whatever they say, and however they say it.

Guest-led conversations give callers the freedom to:

- Tell long stories in their own words
- Ask clarifying questions at any point in the conversation
- Use regional slang, synonyms, and turns of phrase
- Be understood regardless of their accent, the quality of the phone connection, or background noise

Guest-led conversations must also inspire confidence. At every turn of the conversation, the caller must feel that they are understood and, in return, that they are receiving a genuinely helpful response.

If callers believe they can get a better answer from a manager in your restaurant or an agent in your central reservations team, why shouldn't they insist on speaking to one?

▶ **Listen to some real calls**

6. Voice assistants: should you build or should you buy?

When deciding which voice assistant to use, restaurants are faced with the decision of whether to build something from scratch using a DIY platform or buy something custom-made.

Here are the pros and cons of both approaches.

	Description	Benefits	Limitations
Build	Building a voice assistant from scratch, or using a conversational AI "DIY" platform.	• Perceived high level of control • Perceived low costs	• Requires in-house expertise of voice AI • Limited voice capabilities and lack of unique brand voice for each restaurant location • Slow to build/labor intensive • Hidden costs • Builds technical debt
Buy	Buying a voice assistant fully customized to your business and use cases(s).	• Specialist expertise from proven deployments • Fast time to value • High quality • Reduced effort • Cost-effective • Built to integrate into your existing technology ecosystem	• Perceived low level of control - not a problem if the vendor owns and maintains their own machine learning models • Perceived high costs - often lower than expected when you factor in hidden costs of DIY platforms

7.

The buying process

Buying a guest-led voice assistant doesn't have to be complicated.

Key areas to consider

What problems are you trying to solve?

Restaurants buy voice assistants to tackle a number of different problems. Identifying the key problems you want to address is crucial to shaping the best solution for your business. You should consider:

- **Cost-to-serve:** Are you able to support every guest within budget?

- **Labor management:** Do you have enough people to manage call volume?

- **Service levels:** Are you meeting agreed service levels around call wait times?

- **Demand peaks:** Do you experience expected or unexpected peaks in call volume?

- **Consistency:** Are you able to deliver consistently high-quality service?

What are your technical capabilities/limitations?

Technology limitations often prevent reservation teams from deploying conversational technologies.

But technical expertise and complex integrations are not always required to automate a significant portion of calls. Call types like FAQs can be handled without API integrations, and call handle time can be cut by using voice assistants to take down details before handing them off to a person to complete a transaction.

Demonstrating success in simple use cases will enable you to get buy-in from other areas of the business, opening up access to technical expertise and additional budget.

Potential pitfalls

The following issues could arise from a rushed
or poorly considered buying process.

Slow time to value

- Overly complicated DIY projects
  can turn into expensive science
  experiments that never get deployed

- Lack of post-deployment support
  may result in poor performance,
  impacting ROI

Brand damage

- Poor guest experiences can lead
  to bad reviews, complaints, and
  bad press

- Guests may decide to go to another
  location or venue as a result of
  bad experiences

Tech burden

- Maintenance requirements impact
  performance and cause friction
  between teams

- Inflexible architecture will require
  heavy tech lift to implement changes

Operational inefficiencies

- Lack of or inaccurate reporting
  capabilities may result in poor
  operational decision-making

- Poor performance may put additional
  pressure on your people

Who should be involved?

Operations leaders usually lead the buying process for voice AI in restaurants, as they are well acquainted with guest needs and have experience goals already in place.

Operations leaders will typically work with technology partners (in-house or third party) to support the deployment of a voice assistant.

What does the operations team need?

- Proven ROI within similar restaurant groups

- Complete trust that guests will be understood over noisy phone connections

- A system that fully resolves guest queries

- The ability to update the voice assistant with new information

- A solution that delivers competitive support experiences

- Access to data-driven insights that will inform business decisions

What does the technology team need?

- A smooth and pain-free integration process

- A solution that meets security and compliance regulations

- A solution that requires little technical support to update and maintain

8.

Restaurant voice AI success story:

How Big Table Group automates £140k in reservations each month

PolyAI worked with the Big Table Group to develop a guest-led voice assistant that provides a consistent, friendly, and welcoming conversational experience to take, amend, and cancel restaurant reservations, as well as answer FAQs throughout the conversation.

Integrating with existing booking systems

It was vital that the solution could integrate with their booking platform. PolyAI was an easy choice for them, having already proven success in the restaurant industry with other deployments that involved an integration with pre-existing booking platforms.

"The initial build and deployment of the voice assistant was seamless, - all we needed to do was provide the information and a few API keys. The rollout to other locations and brands has been really easy too, it's like a well-oiled machine now."

Devon Trew
Head of IT Projects & Operations at Big Table Group

Scaling across brands, locations, and use cases

The deployment began small, starting with ten sites across the Bella Italia and Cafe Rouge brands. PolyAI is now taking reservations for the Big Table Group in 130 restaurant locations across 3 of their core brands around the UK, with more due to roll out in 2024.

The Big Table Group can now answer every call, booking on average 3,800 reservations per month and contributing £140,000+ from bookings made over the phone across the three restaurant brands.

"The restaurant staff love it. They're able to focus on the guests in front of them instead of worrying about phones that are constantly ringing. It makes their jobs easier, and it's a better experience for our customers."

Devon Trew
Head of IT Projects & Operations at Big Table Group

3,800

reservations per month

£140,000+

from phone bookings

9.

Final considerations

Before making a final decision, it's important to consider whether your chosen provider wants to help you on your AI journey

Hypercare and ongoing improvements

Does the provider offer intensive hypercare post-launch to help you meet your success criteria? Are they available to help you interpret insights to develop a future-facing roadmap for customer care?

Security and compliance

Does the provider meet all of your security and compliance regulations? How will they ensure that your system learns from your data while remaining compliant?

Customer success and support

Will you have access to goal-oriented customer support that prioritizes your ability to hit your goals?

Innovation

Will the provider work with you in a collaborative partnership to drive true innovation in your restaurant?

PolyAI is the inventor of guest-led voice assistants.

To find out more about how PolyAI can help you put your guests in the driver's seat, improve loyalty and reduce cost-to -serve, schedule a demo with our team.