



BUYERS' GUIDE

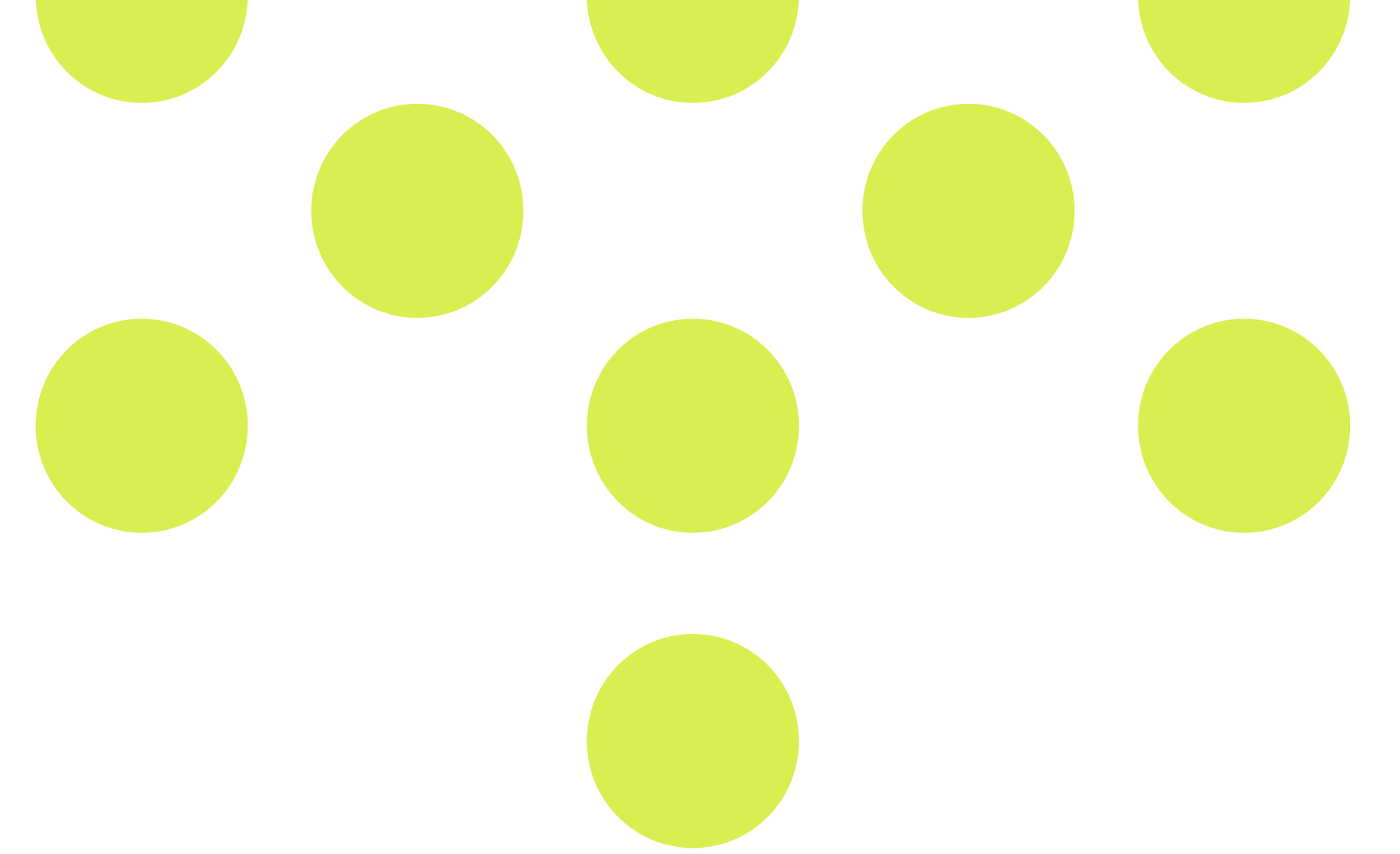
The definitive buying guide to delivering 5-star guest experiences with AI



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Hotels are under increasing operational pressure at the front desk and within the call center. Many are facing the worst staffing shortage in recent history, exacerbated by rising labor costs and high staff attrition.

From bookings to checking out, ensuring guest satisfaction at every stage of a guest's experience has never been more critical, especially as review sites for any hotel will be one of the first things guests see when researching a hotel's name.

To provide excellent guest experiences while alleviating pressure on staff, many hotels have invested in digital self-service, especially apps that allow guests to check in, browse FAQs, and make service requests without having to speak with a staff member.

Many guests will not download an app if they don't have plans to visit again in the future, and while self-service options have reduced call volume to some degree, **73% of customers still call**, either as a first option or following an unsuccessful digital interaction.

Hotel leaders have turned to voice automation to help, but legacy voice technologies have delivered disappointing experiences. Many customers have developed tricks to bypass conversational IVRs, shouting 'AGENT' or mashing their keypads in an attempt to speak directly with an agent.

But times are changing, and a new generation of voice assistants promises higher call containment, better guest experiences, and a higher degree of control than ever before.

While the technology has improved drastically, deciding who to work with is harder than ever. With thousands of vendors now touting conversational AI platforms, hotel leaders 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 any hotel leader's career. 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 hotel leaders and explain how you can leverage voice technology to deliver 5-star guest experiences.



1. What are hotel leaders focusing on?

Many hotel leaders are elevating themselves and their teams.
Here's what those leaders are thinking about.

Balancing ROI with GX (guest experience)

Hotel leaders are challenging the status quo of the phone channel as a cost center, using customer service as a channel for building loyalty through great guest experiences.

Data-driven optimization

Hotel leaders are leveraging guest call data to drive optimization across the whole organization.

AI joins the contact center team

Hotel leaders are using AI to improve the guest experience and reduce cost-to-serve with always-on, consistent, and guest-centric support.



2. How are hotel contact center heroes creating value with voice assistants?

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



Increased capacity

Voice assistants fully or partially automate calls without the customer needing to speak to an advisor.

You can be ready for unexpected peaks and seasonal periods.



Revenue gain

By answering 100% of calls, voice assistants ensure companies don't miss revenue-generating opportunities.

Offer alternative room options.

Process payments over the phone.



Improved CX

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

Answer FAQs, recognize loyalty members and returning guests.

Initiate housekeeping requests and resolve billing inquiries.



Operational excellence

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

Understand when guests are calling and why you are experiencing peaks in demand.



Improved employee experience

Agents are under less pressure to handle high call volumes and can focus on more rewarding calls that make use of their skills - plus they have time to take breaks!

Deliver a better in-person experience where front-of-house staff can be attentive (no more juggling the phone and guests).



3. What should a voice assistant be capable of?

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



Taking room reservations
Answer every call immediately. Accurately distinguish between check-in dates and check-out dates, offer different room types, and take payments over the phone, reducing the need for staff intervention.



Personalizing the guest experience
Integrate with property management systems and middleware services to differentiate the experience by addressing guests with personalized messages and recognizing loyal, returning guests.



Initiating housekeeping requests
Accurately understand requested item(s) and how many are required, regardless of factors such as accents or background noise. Integrations with telephony systems also capture a caller's room number, enabling voice assistants to initiate workflows without human intervention.



Resolving billing inquiries
Answer billing calls immediately and route the caller to the correct department, or send guests an SMS containing an email address to make their requests directly or trigger an email with a copy of their bill via integrations with a hotel's property management systems.



Scaling across hundreds of sites
Update the voice to reflect site-specific details such as check-in times, location, directions, and hotel facilities. Easily and quickly deploy across multiple sites simultaneously.





Handling complex reservations

Guide guests through the booking process in a natural and friendly way while following business logic and accounting for multiple room types, room availability, guest details, and number of people



Understanding guest names

Accurately recognize names to create a more seamless booking experience.



Bookings

Take room, hotel, and facilities reservations in the same way a front-desk team member would. Amend and cancel existing reservations.



PBX/call routing

Understand the guest’s query, ask clarifying questions, and route the call to the best person or place.



FAQs

Answer brand-level and site-specific questions.



Loyalty account management

Handle common account transactions like updating addresses, password resets, upgrades, etc.



Payments

Taking credit card payments securely.



Personalization

Connect with your back-end systems to offer personalized service to your guests.



Multilingual support

Speak different languages to offer accessible and inclusive support to all of your guests.





4. What automation options do hotel leaders have?

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

When it comes to creating voice experiences that keep customers engaged, not all solutions are best placed to meet hotels’ 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 restricts callers to limited options and are often bypassed because callers feel unable to match their complex queries to simple IVR options | Conversational IVRs sound robotic and force callers to guess which keywords will trigger the appropriate response | 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 customer 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 hotel guest service 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 and adding to the busy role of front-of-house staff.

The most effective voice assistants are guest-led. This means they put your guests 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.

The goal is to replicate the ease and comfort of speaking with a knowledgeable concierge, front desk, or central reservations team member, where guests can freely make reservations and housekeeping requests and inquire about services and facilities without feeling constrained.

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. Guests are often misunderstood and become increasingly frustrated.

To deliver genuinely helpful support, voice assistants must earn the guest's trust. This means understanding callers, whatever they say, and however they say it. The voice assistant should mimic the efficiency of friendly front-of-house staff, streamlining guest interactions and enhancing the overall experience.

Guest-led conversations give callers the freedom to:

- Tell long stories with too much detail in their own words - e.g., *Can I check out later than ten? I slept in late and won't be out by eleven.*
- Ask clarifying questions at any point in the conversation, e.g., *does the room have a hair dryer?*
- Use regional slang, synonyms, and turns of phrase - e.g., *Where's the best place to grab something to eat?*
- Be understood regardless of their accent, phone connection quality, or background noise. e.g., A guest might call from a busy airport to inquire about transport options to your hotel

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 member of staff, why shouldn't they insist on speaking to one?



Listen to some real calls





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

When deciding which voice assistant to use, you're faced with the decision of whether to build something from scratch, or 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. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Perceived high level of control● Perceived low costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Limited voice capabilities● Slow to build/labor intensive● Hidden costs● Builds technical debt |
| Buy | Buying a voice assistant fully customized to your business and use cases(s). | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Specialist expertise● Fast time to value● High quality● Reduced effort● Cost effective | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● 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?

Hotel leaders 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 over the phone and at the front desk?
- **Demand peaks:** How do you handle seasonal peaks in call volume?
- **Consistency:** Are you able to deliver consistently high-quality service?

What are your technical capabilities/limitations?

Technology limitations often prevent would-be hotel leaders 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

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?

The process should be led by the operational leader in charge of guest communications. You know your guests best and know what you need to achieve to hit your goals.

You will work closely with colleagues from finance and technology teams to ensure the solution meets everybody's requirements and can be implemented successfully in your contact center.

What does the contact center team need?

- Proven ROI within similar hotels
- 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. Core capabilities and considerations: A contact center leader's definitive checklist

In order for guests to engage with a voice assistant, they need to trust that its capable of understanding them and solving their problems.

As such, your voice assistant needs to be able to understand callers whatever they say, and however they say it. It should be able to provide helpful responses at every step of the conversation in a voice that sounds natural and feels like talking to a friendly concierge or front-of-house staff member.

These are the main technical capabilities you should discuss with vendors when appraising voice AI solutions.





| Functionality | Capability | Considerations |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| Understanding what the caller is saying | Automatic speech recognition (ASR) | Relying on out-of-the-box speech recognition solutions will limit your capacity for understanding callers. Look for solutions that offer additional ASR tuning mechanisms and Spoken Language Understanding (SLU) capabilities. |
| | Natural language understanding (NLU) | Large language models (LLMs) developed especially for customer service use cases. Pre-trained LLMs should require less training data, enabling faster time to value. |
| Identifying callers | Alphanumeric capture | Your guests will need to give dates, the number of beds, rooms required, loyalty numbers, and card details. Look for a solution with a proven track record of taking alphanumeric strings over the phone without requiring keypad input. |
| | Phoneme matching | Identifying names is essential for PBX call routing. Look for solutions that can extract names at a phonetic level. |
| Extracting values | Value extraction model | Value extraction models that can: extract values from long utterances; understand values even if they are given in non-traditional formats (e.g., ‘Me and my wife” = 2 people); “listen out for” and record values whenever they are given instead of having engineers specify when and where to take down certain pieces of information. This will allow you to identify customer loyalty numbers and deliver the personalized service your guests expect. |
| Non-linear conversations | Dialogue policy | Solutions that allow callers to truly lead the conversation. This means they can answer a question with a completely unrelated piece of information, and the solution can address that before bringing the conversation back to where it needs to be in order to complete the transaction. |
| Consistent branded voice | Natural-sounding voice | Natural-sounding voices that feel like speaking to the welcoming voice of your front-of-house team. This will ensure that guests engage with the system, increasing call containment rates and giving time back to your staff to be attentive to in-house guests |
| | Dialogue design | Design support capabilities to ensure scripting and voice direction have maximum impact over the phone. When a guest confirms a booking, the voice sounds happy and encouraging, and when a guest has an issue, the voice is understanding. |





9. Guest-led voice assistants evaluation template

This capabilities checklist will help you choose a guest-led voice assistant solution that will improve the guest experience and drive operational efficiencies, turning **you** into a contact center hero.

| Core capabilities | Solution #1 | Solution #2 | Solution #3 | PolyAI |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------|
| Accurately understand intent in natural language | | | | |
| Pre-trained model requires little to no training data | | | | |
| Accurate intent detection regardless of accent | | | | |
| Accurately extract values from natural conversation | | | | |
| Allow callers to drive non-linear conversations | | | | |
| Access custom dashboards with realtime data & insights | | | | |
| Speak multiple languages | | | | |
| Go live in 6 weeks or less | | | | |



10. Final considerations

Before making a final decision, it's important to consider whether your chosen provider wants to help you on your journey to deploying a guest-led voice assistant.

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 your contact center?

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?

Guest success and support

Will you have access to goal-oriented guest 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 contact center?

PolyAI is the inventor of guest-led voice assistants.

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

