

Ashamed to ask for technical support? You are not alone

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The spread of new technologies tied to a race for innovation, products and services' growing interdependence and, more generally, the transformation of products into services can also make them more

complex to use. To help consumers, companies are introducing a wealth of instructions, tutorials and pictograms that can be difficult to understand, all too often leaving consumers even more confused.

The scene is all too familiar: who has never scratched their head in front of a machine, a new device or trying to complete an online booking? While many innovations are often designed and implemented to ease the consumer's daily life, they may also be the source of new problems. Consumers adopt various strategies to cope with these difficulties of use: online tutorials, help from neighbors or friends, but many, perhaps surprisingly, also end up dropping their new product or service altogether.

The reasons for not seeking help may be psychological. In the field of social psychology, over the last 40 years, researchers have been exploring help-seeking in various contexts, mostly focusing on medical and [psychological help](#) or on help-seeking in the classroom. It appears that not everyone is [comfortable asking for help](#) and that some individuals systematically seem to avoid seeking help.

Indeed, help-seeking may be perceived as threatening, as it may call into question the applicant's personal competence in his or her own eyes. But he or she may also fear appearing incompetent in the eyes of the helper. Help-seeking also conflicts with important values for Westerners: autonomy and control. Finally, it may restrict one's freedom of choice, for example when feeling forced to accept a commercial offer in return for the help given.

Fear of appearing incompetent

In our article to be published in the journal [Recherches et Application en Marketing](#), we explored one of the possible responses for the modern troubled consumer: seeking the supplier's help. Although it appears to be

a fairly obvious solution, it is not often used by consumers.

Through a series of studies, we sought to understand whether avoiding to seek help exists in a consumption context when a [customer](#) finds it difficult to use a product or service. A [qualitative study](#) and four quantitative studies (samples between 150 and 450 individuals) led us to the conclusion that more than a third—a significant and seemingly large proportion—of consumers tend to avoid asking for help.

These studies also enabled us to build a psychometric measurement tool to assess the tendency of each individual to be more or less avoidant. The common behavior of help-seeking avoidance is based on two dimensions, stemming from the qualitative part of the study. The first dimension is the refusal to ask for help because it causes embarrassment or even shame for the asker, as one consumer we interviewed explained: "Sometimes you feel ashamed, because you are afraid that the person you are talking to might think you don't understand anything."

The second dimension lies in the evaluation of the interlocutor. More specifically, in both their perceived willingness and their perceived ability to help, as illustrated by this statement of a consumer: "[Companies] are all the same, they are always rude and they never solve your problems."

These two dimensions contribute to explain consumers' intention to seek help or not. This research also highlights the relationship between the avoidance tendency and specific psychological traits such as an external [locus of control](#) (the tendency to attribute the cause of events outside one's control to others, a specific context, for example), [state orientation](#) (the tendency not to act) and [social anxiety](#).

Companies can take action

Difficulties encountered are admittedly damaging for the consumer, but they are also ultimately damaging for the [company](#). Indeed, a customer who cannot have full use of one's product may abandon not only the product, but the brand. One may also express dissatisfaction or frustration and spread negative word of mouth. Incidentally, there is a high failure rate for high-tech product launches.

What can companies do to ease and encourage requests from their customers? First of all, they can act on the potential embarrassment. Indeed, it appears that help requested through a screen leads to less discomfort. In this respect, live chat is a very interesting tool to encourage the triggering of requests.

In addition, companies can communicate about their willingness and ability to assist their customers—and dedramatise assistance requests. Indeed, many companies still do not advertise on means available to contact them, often for fear of having to manage too many customer contacts. According to our research, this is interpreted by [consumers](#) as unwillingness to help.

Moreover, communicating the positive results of customers requesting help or, more generally, of contacts with the customer service would also be an effective lever. Finally, in addition to being beneficial for customer satisfaction, requests for help can have another positive impact: for example, they allow improvements to be made to products and services.

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