

Can You Be Friends With Your Coffee Maker?

Why people personify machines and gadgets



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- 1 **T**HE NUMBER OF DEVICES you can talk to is multiplying — first it was your phone, then your car, and now you can boss around your appliances. **35-1** One app developer told *The Washington Post* that after interacting with Amazon's Alexa, his toddler started talking to coasters. But even without chatty gadgets, research suggests that under certain circumstances, people anthropomorphize everyday products.
- 2 **35-2** In one experiment, people who reported feeling isolated were more likely than others to attribute free will and consciousness to various gadgets. In turn, feeling kinship with objects can reduce loneliness. When college students were reminded of a time they'd been excluded socially, they compensated by exaggerating their number of Facebook friends — unless they were first given tasks that caused them to interact with their phone as if it had human qualities. The phone apparently stood in for real friends.
- 3 At other times, we personify products in an effort to understand them. One study found that three in four respondents cursed at their computer — and the more their computer gave them problems, the more likely they were to report that it had "its own beliefs and desires."

- 4 So how do people assign traits to an object? In part, we rely on appearances. On humans, wide faces are associated with dominance. Similarly, people rated cars, clocks, and watches with wide faces as more dominant-looking than narrow-faced ones, and preferred them — especially in competitive situations (like confronting a former bully at a school reunion). An analysis of car sales in Germany found that cars with grilles that were upturned like smiles and headlights that were slanted like narrowed eyes sold best. The purchasers saw these features as increasing a car's friendliness and aggressiveness, respectively.
- 5 It's little wonder so many companies use mascots to bring brands to life. A taxonomy of 1,151 brand characters found symbols that were human or humanlike to be prevalent: People (the Marlboro Man) were most popular, accounting for 21 percent of mascots, followed by birds (Twitter), domesticated animals (Morris the Cat), wild animals (Tony the Tiger), and various plants (Mr. Peanut).
- 6 35-3 When a coffee maker was anthropomorphized in an ad ("I am Aroma" versus just "Aroma"), men — but not women — felt betrayed by increases in its price. Now that speech-enabled coffee makers are on the market, maybe the machines can sweet-talk their way back into men's hearts.

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