Chatbots are here to stay, it's just a matter of trust

By Josiah Njuku   30 Nov 2020

The uptake of chatbot solutions is growing from strength to strength across the globe, as companies spanning various industry segments and verticals are beginning to realise that this technology can effectively transform the way businesses communicate with their customers.

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According to international research company Gartner, chatbots are set to be integrated across a quarter of all customer service and support operations by 2020. This is due to organisations realising the advantages of automated self-service with the ability to escalate a problem to a human agent in complex situations.

While there were some early adopters, chatbots were far from being a hit at the onset, and early chatbot use cases were often treated with a large dose of scepticism by customers. The vast majority of people chose to stick to tried and tested methods of communication, such as mobile apps, USSD or even physically visiting a service centre, as they remained wary of potential bugs and inaccuracies that could arise with bots.

Gaining confidence

But as chatbot solutions matured, more people gained confidence in the technology, leading to a changing mindset among consumers. At this stage, conversational artificial intelligence (AI) has matured to the extent where it can comfortably handle critical use cases across various industries.

Not that this early scepticism was without merit. Organisations that got it wrong in the early days would suffer communication breakdowns as they prematurely launched solutions that had not been coded with the required understanding of customer intent or deployed them across channels that were unsuitable for their purpose.

As a result, not only did customers' trust in the business suffer but so did the reputation of chatbot technology. Essentially, a chatbot is a trust-based platform, and at any time when a customer feels that they might be getting inaccurate, or irrelevant responses from the bot – even to something as simple as an FAQ – they are likely to migrate to another brand.

Yet, it is also important to note that chatbots have been around much longer than most people realise. For example, a USSD-driven banking app is a chatbot that is keyword-based and instructions need to be issued to it in a structured manner.

The big change in the recent past has been the evolution of chatbots to a stage where they can accurately understand a complete natural language, and this change has been underpinned by data. We can now create bigger databases of knowledge, and big data is strongly contributing to chatbots being able to understand natural language, through natural language processing (NLP).

Right time and place

At the same time, organisations need to keep in mind the importance of choosing the right communication channel that can support the customer and the chatbot. This depends highly on your target audience and your particular use case.

For example, it would be catastrophic for a bank to think that Facebook Messenger is the right tool on which to deploy a banking bot. Aside from constant reports of Facebook accounts being hacked, Facebook Messenger also does not offer the amount of customisation that a bank would need to successfully reach its customers.

However, the same chatbot could successfully be deployed on a mobile two-way communication channel, such as two-way SMS, or WhatsApp. This would not only provide a better customer experience (CX) but the end-to-end encryption offered by an app like WhatsApp would build more trust.

The chatbot-building process can be somewhat tricky for businesses as some organisations offer solutions for anyone to develop a chatbot within seconds, with no need to have any technical knowledge. These solutions support an omnichannel approach and a bot can be built using a drop and drag interface. With a hosted solution, clients need not worry about the development, hosting and maintenance of the chatbot.

The chatbot ecosystem is rapidly expanding and it is safe to say that chatbots are not going away anytime soon – especially as the technology is continuing to mature and offer more sophisticated solutions. Chatbots have reached a level of maturity that is instilling trust in the technology, enabling businesses to harness the benefits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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