

The unsuspected stumbling blocks of AI for customer experience

By [Mathew Conn](#)

11 Nov 2020

As customers look to drive their own experiences with brands and businesses through omnichannel strategies, the number of local businesses harnessing artificial intelligence (AI) technology has drastically increased this year. However, the level of understanding around the best use of AI technologies, like chatbots, remains low.



Source: Supplied | Mathew Conn, CRO of Merchants Group

In 2019, a report by Microsoft and tax advisory service EY found that 96% of South African businesses expected to gain significant financial benefits from the use of AI to optimise operations. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly shifted the way businesses operate and interact with their customers.

As the country grappled with the effects of the pandemic, chatbot technology was implemented quickly and successfully by many companies in a bid to continue serving and interacting with customers during the national lockdown. GovChat, for example, was able to launch a chatbot in less than two weeks, which offered health advice, information and recommendations around the management of Covid-19. Several AI solutions aimed at tracking the movement of citizens and informing them of possible exposure to the virus were also launched – including Covid Alert SA.

While chatbots successfully enable one-to-one conversations with customers through automated interfaces and are a great way to deliver immediate responses, they are not right for any and all customer interactions.

The first, and possibly most important failure of chatbots, is a direct result of the organisation in question not identifying what customer interactions are right for enhancement with chatbots. If the platform is simply required to send an alert SMS to those people who can be traced to a certain location, and then give them advice based on a set of questions with pre-determined answers through the chatbot function, it is likely to provide a positive customer experience. However, for more complex interaction with customers, it is about striking the right balance between technology and people.

A Merchants survey carried out earlier this year found that when South African consumers were asked what their preferred method of interacting with a brand or business was:

- 42% said contact centres
- 39% said they use WhatsApp or chat as a preferred method
- 36% said social media
- 35% said live chat services like chatbots
- 68% said email

Our survey findings show that while many people might start their query with a chatbot or digital platform, they most often end up seeking a human interaction in order to resolve their query as quickly and effectively as possible. The survey found that problem-solving is the most important trait for contact centre agents, according to consumers.

In my experience, South African agents are specifically skilled when it comes to problem-solving. While AI technology like chatbots certainly has a huge role to play in customer experience in 2020 and beyond, their role will certainly not be to replace people altogether, as there are certain areas where they fall short when it comes to providing positive customer experiences.

Understanding

Because chatbots use open source libraries, most won't be customised to the organisation's specific industry or customers. Pre-trained bots will be limited to their pre-programmed decision path and are limited by the designer or programmer's understanding of customer behaviours and requests.

While chatbots don't reason, smarter bots can cope better with some language nuances; however, without human judgement, chatbot accuracy will always be limited.

Context

Pre-trained chatbots follow a structured conversation plan and can lose the flow fairly easily. With more access to customer history and data, smarter chatbots can 'learn' customer preferences. However, to keep context, chatbots need every possible response to every possible customer request.

Consistency

Chatbots work well if customers start their conversation as a chat, before being transferred to a human agent if needed. When customers have started a conversation on another channel such as phone or email, however, this can pose a challenge. Without consistency across all the organisation's channels, chatbots will force the customers to start over – and risk damaging the organisation's reputation and customer experience.

In a highly competitive market, customer experience is an important differentiator for brands and businesses looking to remain relevant in 2020 and beyond. Chatbots work well when paired with the right experience, which should be defined by specific customer needs. While the adoption of AI technology is increasing in South Africa, there is no doubt that the human element remains critical in providing positive customer experience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mathew Conn is chief revenue officer of Merchants Group.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>