Unleashing value throughout the digital agent journey

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Engaging with customers in meaningful and effective ways to achieve optimum customer experience is critical to business success. It impacts repeat business, brand loyalty, and word of mouth recommendations which are increasingly important in people's buying decisions. Today's consumer also expects 24/7 service, available anytime, anywhere.

If I want to buy anything today, my first port of call is online. Whether I make a purchase or simply conduct research, I expect immediate answers. I don't want to scour a website; and I'm less likely to pick up the phone and talk to someone than I would have been say five years ago. I'm probably also doing my purchasing / researching at odd hours – when it suits me on my chosen device.

However, it's not just about the service received during the transaction. It's the entire customer journey and is made up of many different touch points. Achieving those moments of impact and keeping customers at the core of what you do can make or break a business. So how do businesses respond to this?

The need for 'always on' service

One way many organisations are addressing the evolving 'always on' service need is with digital agents (also known as chatbots, automated agents, virtual assistants, online chats, brand agents, or digital assistants). Your customer service team is core to driving optimum customer experience, which is why launching an automated digital agent can seem daunting. However, this approach can significantly reduce customer service cost, increase first contact resolution, and improve customer experience with real time results.

So what is a digital agent exactly? It's a platform for engagement where an individual interacts with a conversational digital channel instead of chatting to a human (either online or via the phone). With the ability to process natural language, and in many cases the addition of an avatar or character to 'brand' it, digital agents can truly become an extension of a human-focused customer service team, providing customers tailored and specific help when and where they need it.

Gartner predicts that "By 2020, over 50% of medium to large enterprises will have deployed product chatbots." The benefits of implementing a digital agent include extending the service windows for customers without increasing staff, delivering consistent and high quality answers at all times, and allowing existing customer service agents to focus on more complex and valued customer queries.

Keeping the end in mind for ultimate success

Market research company Frost & Sullivan found that US companies are potentially losing over $83 billion annually as a direct result of below-par customer experience, while also finding that 74% of customers have willingly spent more with a business based on previous good experience. Therefore, when rolling out a new customer service engagement platform such as a digital agent, it is critical to execute confidently.

Modern organisations looking to implement digital agents need to ensure a smooth and seamless customer experience from day one. Digital agents can streamline interactions between people and enhance customer experience in an efficient manner, without being excessively costly. To be successful, a digital agent solution

should be able to effectively resolve issues and answer questions with high accuracy and consistency. Human support plays a key role here: in configuring, training and optimising the digital agent system before it is exposed to the end customer.

Outside of comprehensive testing and rigorous monitoring, approaching a digital agent deployment in a phased way and allowing internal users to be testers and moderators, can build confidence and add immediate value to the organisation even before going 'live' to customers directly.

Start safe: internal facing digital agent

Starting safe with an internal facing digital agent for use by customer service representatives only is one way to start. The internal solution can be implemented without the bells and whistles of a consumer digital agent, and evolve and improve over time. Having well documented processes and information articles helps facilitate good customer service as agents can refer to them when responding to customer queries. Storing these in a centralised knowledgebase is one thing, but being able to quickly search and uncover accurate information takes it to another level. By building an internal facing digital agent for use by customer service representatives, organisations can reduce staff training time, ensure consistent and high quality answers, and ultimately improve the speed at which a customer service team responds to, and resolves queries.

These internal facing digital agents can be deployed with a 'minimum viable product' mindset, while still keeping the end customer at the core of the design process. By starting with responses to single keywords, rather than being fully conversational, it is fast to implement, as well as being cost effective. As customer service agents use it to respond to customer queries, the digital agent learns and evolves, with answers flagged as incorrect or incomplete, and further enhancement provided by subject matter experts.

Dip into controlled customer interaction: live chat

The next step would be to implement a live chat channel, serviced by the current customer service team. Utilising live chat can increase customer service efficiency over traditional call based queries, where a customer service representative can meaningfully handle up to four different chats at once. Leveraging the already built and tested internal facing digital agent helps the agent deliver great customer experience to multiple customers concurrently.

Making it is as simple and quick as possible for your customer service team to effectively manage multiple chats is key to this approach being successful. Being able to quickly bounce keywords off to an internal facing digital agent, such as 'return policy', and having desired text, supporting links and additional references returned instantaneously gives the agent autonomy and confidence in delivering great experiences to multiple customers at once. Customer service personnel can still add their own intelligence and personalisation, but the already built and tested internal facing digital agent is leveraged, while having a customer facing lens. It also moves the organisation closer to more consistent, higher quality customer experience regardless of the agent encountered.

Deliver the tested experience: automated digital agent

Leverage the expertise gained in the first two steps and take the digital agent to the next level, engaging with the customer directly as and when they need it. Implementing an automated digital agent results in a chat channel being available to your customers always, without the need for 24/7 staff or support. An automated digital agent can be brought to 'life', with a name, avatar and backstory that complement the brand's image. These principles can then be utilised across a spectrum of technologies including Facebook Messenger, Google Home and other emerging tools at a customer's disposal.

By utilising the same chat engine, answers and services through internal queries and supporting live agents, organisations build confidence in the accuracy and context of answers as they move towards direct customer engagement without human intervention. Adding natural language processing, conversational quirks and the concept of a related conversation (pre-empting what the customer might ask next), all take the digital agent to the next level ready for customer deployment.

Having already implemented live chat adds a usable safety blanket during staffed hours, where any exceptions that can't be handled by the digital agent are passed to a human agent to resolve, while keeping previous conversation and context. **Forrester, in their 2019 predictions blog**, estimated that 60% of chatbot deployments in 2019 will not have effective live-agent safety nets attached to web chat sessions. Access to back-end portals and ongoing analytics and reports allow digital agent success to be measured in real time, including service category and potentially customer satisfaction, meaning organisations will always maintain complete control of their channel.

From there, digital agent potential extends into proactive chats – seeing a customer put an item into a cart and popping up with offers or items often purchased together; and authenticated automated chats, where a digital agent is fully integrated into an organisation's eco-system and can, with verification, perform actions like paying bills.

In order for any digital agent solution to succeed, getting the basics right up front is critical. Following this approach is one way that organisations can thoroughly build, test and maintain a digital agent without risking negative customer experience.

Shaun Edsall is a Client Advisor in Business Process Services for DXC Technology Australia and New Zealand. With over 10 years' experience delivering customer outcomes, he is passionate about working with organisations to harness the value digital transformation, automation and modernised business processes can have on both the front and back office. His goal is to take the internal noise away from organisations and help them focus on their core products and services in an ever competitive market.

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