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Meet the New CX Power Couple: Bots and Agents

Blending Human & Artificial Intelligence for Better Outcomes

Automation first found its way into customer service as a means for companies to keep up with the ever-increasing number of devices and channels customers use to interact. And while it sparked initial fears that "the robots will take all our jobs," what we've seen recently is that blending chatbots and human agents can actually help improve the performance of both, while also elevating the customer experience (CX). As artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning continue to advance and customer expectations continue to rise, this trend will continue to grow. The secret is finding the right balance between virtual and human assistance.

The New Customer Service Landscape

In the past decade the proliferation of smart, connected devices followed by social media and messaging platforms led to exponential growth in the number of channels consumers can use to interact with businesses. It also changed the way consumers want to connect. In the past, the best way to get support was almost always by phone. For many of today's customers—especially the younger generation—phone is now a last resort. Today, customers prefer to use digital channels and self serve whenever possible, which is where AI comes into play.

Human interaction and even traditional contact center channels still have a significant role to play in reshaping and transforming CX. The key is knowing when and how to integrate these with an environment that's increasingly digital.

Source: Dimension Data, "2019 Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Key Findings Report"

In recent years, AI and conversational technology have gone from being the stuff of science fiction to becoming part of our day-to-day lives. It started with Siri on the iPhone and has now moved into our homes, with at least 40 million virtual personal assistants (VPAs) like Amazon Alexa and Google Home already being sold, probably more. The continuing trend towards self service means consumers are now more comfortable interacting with chatbots and virtual assistants than ever before.

"78% of organizations predict they will offer fully automated customer contacts, but 70% also expect to see an increase in human-assisted service."

Source: Dimension Data, "2017 Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Key Findings Report"

> "If customers are aware of new capabilities, they will experiment with what's on offer. If the new channel provides value to them, they'll adopt it. If not, they'll revert to previous ways of interacting."
>
> Source: Dimension Data, "2019 Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Key Findings Report"

The more consumers interact with AI, the better they expect it to be. Customers today aren't satisfied with simple ask and answer conversations. They expect a chatbot or virtual agent to really understand them, anticipate their needs, and do more than just provide information. They want action. According to Forrester Principal Analyst, Art Schoeller, "Machine learning in customer service is moving more towards outbound proactive and preemptive models, with customer service being facilitated by AI."[1]

The benefits of AI for companies are clear—increased efficiency and better engagement by meeting customers where they are. But the deeper value of AI and machine learning lies in enhancing the customer experience. And that requires a human touch.

Not Just Blending, Balancing

While automation initially focused on deflecting contacts, today it's about enhancing the customer experience. Despite early fears that AI would be the end of the customer service agent, what we're actually seeing is the opposite. A recent Forrester survey found that while many large contact centers expect to see a drop in their overall volume of calls, they also expect the average call length to remain the same or increase. And despite the widespread use of automation in call centers, 26% of respondents expect to increase their agent headcount by at least 10%[2].

> "Focus on worker augmentation, not worker replacement."
>
> Gartner: "Artificial Intelligence and the Enterprise"

According to Schoeller, leading organizations are thinking about creating a symbiotic relationship between bots and agents. This means enabling active learning in the context of customer service, with agents using collaborative training to continually improve AI models and AI sitting alongside the agent guiding them through an interaction, then using data collected from that interaction to build additional learning into the model itself. It's all about figuring out which elements of both human and artificial intelligence will help you give your customers the experience they want.

For example, when a self-service interaction escalates to an agent, is it seamless or does it involve two separate, disjointed experiences? Recognizing when a customer needs personal assistance is only part of the equation. If they have to start over, either by opening a new chat window or when connecting to an agent, they're going to have a less than ideal experience. And that's not good for business. What companies need to do is leverage what the AI has learned and pass it along to the agent, who can pick up where the bot left off and turn what may be a frustrating experience into a satisfying one.

35%
of consumers have already bought items with the help of a chatbot.

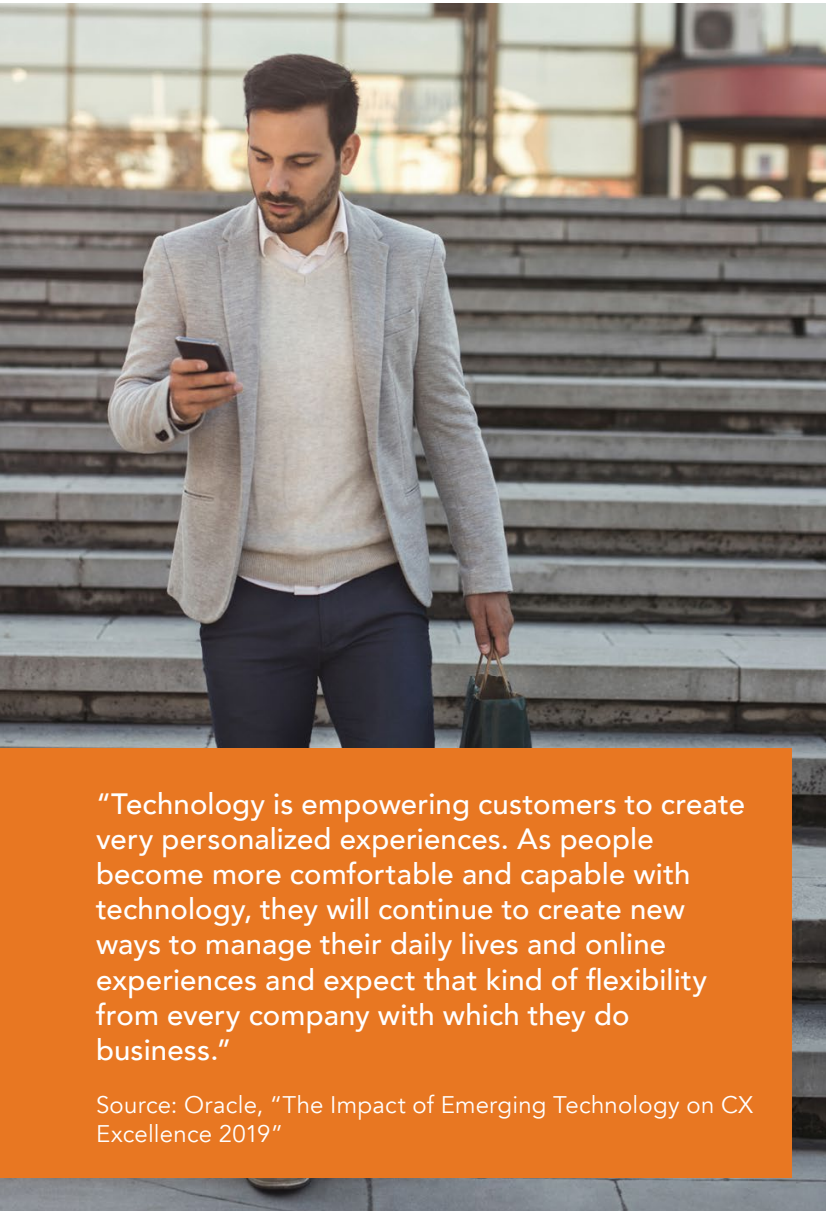Source: Leftronic. "41+ Must-Know Chatbot Statistics in 2020"

> "Bad experiences are driving customers away—faster than you think. In the US, even when people love a company or product, 59% will walk away after several bad experiences and 17% [will] after just one."
>
> Source: PwC, "Experience Is Everything"

88%
of consumers expect their chatbot interactions to follow them through their transfer to a live person.

Source: Business Insider, "44% of US Consumers Want Chatbots Over Humans for Customer Relations"

Industry Example / Telecom

[24]7.ai™ helped a top telecom company save a project $6M in the first year alone by blending chatbots and agents to control costs without compromising service. The company significantly reduced call volumes by automating common journeys and reduced average handle times by using AI to improve call routing and passing on the full context of escalated calls to the agent during handoff. While costs went down, customer satisfaction went up.
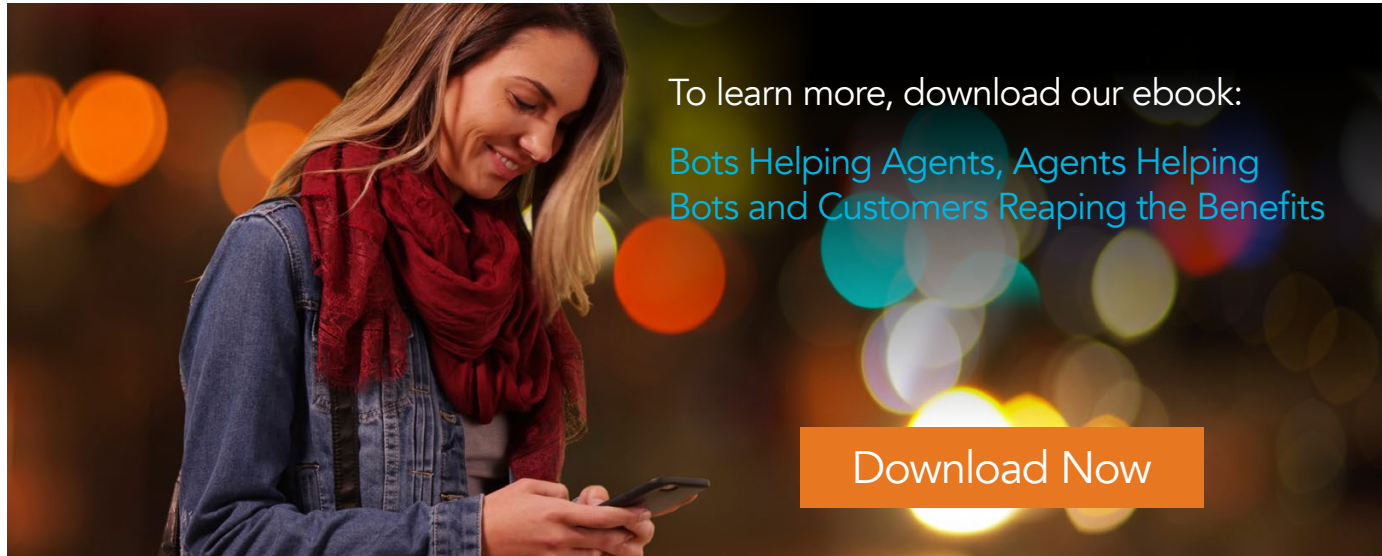
Industry Example / Financial Services

Another real-world example of this is Lloyd's Banking Group in the United Kingdom, which put together a cross-functional team to improve their digital banking experience by looking at the top ten customer intents and asking how they can smooth out those journeys. The team includes stakeholders from multiple departments, including the banking product owners, digital technologies team, CX design lead, and the customer service center.[3] Schoeller explains, "This is a best practice. It's about linking the full customer service journey spanning both self and assisted service."

Learn from the Leaders

Forrester isn't the only source predicting that blended AI is the future. A recent MyCustomer article stated, "The successful contact center of the future will be able to harness the best of both the human and automated worlds to give customers the service and experience they want."[4] And according to Business Insider, "US consumers appear to be warming up to the idea of using chatbots as a customer relationship management (CRM) tool… Nevertheless, businesses must ensure that the chatbot experience isn't substandard lest they risk alienating customers. Moreover, the automation service shouldn't be used in isolation but be able to be seamlessly picked up by a human agent."[5]

CX leaders know that driving satisfaction, loyalty, and revenue all start with giving customers what they want: the best possible experience on the channel of their choice, whether that means end-to-end self service, efficient assisted service, or a mix of both. To meet both customer expectations and business needs, the focus should be on striking a balance between human and artificial intelligence to create seamless, satisfying experiences.

"Technology is empowering customers to create very personalized experiences. As people become more comfortable and capable with technology, they will continue to create new ways to manage their daily lives and online experiences and expect that kind of flexibility from every company with which they do business."

Source: Oracle, "The Impact of Emerging Technology on CX Excellence 2019"

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To learn more, download our ebook:

Bots Helping Agents, Agents Helping
Bots and Customers Reaping the Benefits

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[1] [24]7.ai & Forrester Research Webinar "It's All About the Journey: Blending Human & Virtual Agents to Optimize Results"
[2] Forrester, 2017: Global Business Technographics Network and Telecommunications Survey
[3] Forrester Case Study: Lloyd's Banking Group's Journey-Focused Digital Transformation/24-7 Webinar: "It's All About the Journey: Blending Human & Virtual Agents to Optimize Results"
[4] MyCustomer, "Could Chatbots Ever Completely Replace Human Agents?"
[5] Business Insider, "44% of US Consumers Want Chatbots Over Humans for Customer Relations"

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