

COLUMNS

## Is your brand developing a chatbot strategy?

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*Brian Heikes is vice president of product at 3Cinteractive*

By **Brian Heikes**

Marketers and customer service professionals are now paying a lot of attention to chatbots. Whereas the Web, mobile marketing and smartphone applications were at one point the next big thing, chatbots are now becoming a pervasive part of a brand's digital toolkit.

Bots, as they are known, are being talked about as the next evolution of messaging interaction between brands and consumers.

Bots up

The excitement, of course, is the fact that bots have the potential of driving a real-time, one-to-one interaction that is highly intelligent and conversational. Thus, this messaging channel has the potential to lead to a new form of conversational commerce, where brands can elevate their ability to engage with consumers on a more personal level.

To successfully execute on this, bots will need to have intelligence on the person that they are conversing with, as well as sufficient capabilities to assist that person with the task he or she needs to complete. Otherwise, bots will quickly turn into the next version of the hated voice response systems that are blockers to customer service at many companies.

Messaging apps are becoming a significant strategy for brands simply because it is how consumers are communicating today.

According to a recent article, more than 2.5 billion people have installed at least one messaging app on their smartphone, and messaging has replaced phone calls as the communication medium of choice for millennials. Because of the penetration into consumers' daily lives, these platforms now provide an outstanding medium through which brands can reach their customers.

While bots hold amazing potential, this interaction channel remains in its infancy.

Marketers considering the development of bots do not yet know the true ramifications and response from consumers who may be weary of talking to a computer on an individual level.

The big question is how to cut through the hype to ensure that the bots developed for your brand exceed the expectations of your customers to provide an experience that surprises and delights them.

If your brand is planning a bot strategy, here are some important considerations to keep in mind:

Conversational commerce is now

Conversational commerce has been very much in the news lately.

Messaging platforms, artificial intelligence and virtual assistants all of which are critical components to a successful bot play have been widely discussed, particularly at the recent Google I/O conference.

What is more, Facebook announced that it is opening up its platform to commercial messaging via bots and provided numerous tools to enable brands to develop their own entries.

Both of these announcements have created lots of buzz and new excitement.

But let us not forget that there can also be plays that are simpler and more direct, such as ReplyYes, which recently raised \$2.5 million after announcing that it had sold more than \$1 million in vinyl records via text message.

The larger context here is that by adding context and enabling direct and timely action, messaging becomes the evolution of brand-consumer engagement in the persona of Bots.

Medium shapes the message

It is important for brands to understand the components of driving successful engagement via messaging.

Successful efforts will be optimized for the channel which for messaging apps, means mobile-first. This means designing a messaging-specific experience as opposed to simply shrinking down the Web or taking your RSS-news feed and sizing it to fit on a smartphone device.

Think of your design strategy for use of pictures, navigation, conversation such as typing and swiping, and access to other aspects of the brand's mobile content.

Additionally, the entire experience should be able to be successfully completed within the messaging app.

Many early bots are delivering part of the experience in messaging, and then linking off to a store page to finalize the transaction.

However, it is a much more engaging experience that allows the customer to complete all steps as part of the conversation. This may require an initial setup process such as storing a card on file and entering shipping address, but the longer-term benefit is a delightful customer experience.

Consider the Domino's pizza ordering experience just tweet a pizza slice to @Dominos, and in 30 minutes get your default pizza delivered to your door.

Excelling at the bot experience

Conversational commerce, like most messaging engagements, must be permission-based.

Text messages are regulated by the TCPA (Telephone Consumer Protection Act), Facebook requires review and approval, and other messaging services also require customer opt-in.

Compliance in a messaging environment is critical, and failure to follow best practices can lead to penalties, fines or loss of customers who are dissatisfied with your approach. This can make or break your brand in many cases.

The bot experience must also be relevant and engaging.

Personalization, beyond just inserting in to the message, is key and, fortunately, the ability to be personalized is what is driving much of the bot discussion recently.

Customer data compiled from other channels should be used to help establish a successful interaction.

However, this data must be used appropriately in the conversation.

For example, if you already have data on location and shopping habits, do not ask a customer to type in that information during the welcome part of the conversation, which can be perceived as annoying. Customers know that brands have data about them, and they expect them to use it.

Customer, not content, is king

Due to the compliance restrictions, most bot engagement will begin with the customer initiating contact. Because of this, marketers need to have a strategy in place to turn that initial reactive contact into a positive experience that extracts permission for ongoing pushed interaction.

Marketers must learn to predict how these interactions take shape and focus on serving the customer's needs first, as opposed to the brand's needs. Otherwise, consumers will quickly opt out of the program.

opposed to the brand's needs, otherwise, consumers will quickly opt out of the program.

This means that the conversation strategy should be up front with consumers on what they can expect from the bot be that advertising, customer service or information delivery.

No matter which path the bot takes, a successful conversation will enhance the relationship with the brand, ultimately leading to increased engagement.

What is your bot's brand's personality?

The purpose of the bot is to have a unique conversation with each customer. And since the bot is essentially representing your brand, you must determine how you want to be perceived by the customer.

Personality and capability is key here.

Will your bot be very technical (consumer electronics discussion), or perhaps filled with outdoor wittiness (travel and vacation discussion)?

Marketers should be prepared to design the right interaction into their bot to enhance the personality so that it represents the brand accordingly.

Measurement will determine success

Like any successful customer facing strategy, measurement is critical.

For example, is your bot creating engagement? How are customers responding, and what are their actions? When do customer engage most with your bot? What are the outcomes? And how do they interact with your brand immediately following their bot experience?

BOT-DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT represents a great opportunity for brands and marketers to enhance their messaging and mobile strategies.

While they are not designed to fully replace communication strategies for brands, they represent the next iteration of technology that businesses can bring.

The right bot strategy will enhance the brand and strengthen its relationship with customers and stakeholders, which ultimately drives revenue.

*Brian Heikes is vice president of product at [3Cinteractive](#), Boca Raton, FL. Reach him at [bheikes@3c.com](mailto:bheikes@3c.com).*

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