



Customer Service in the Age of ChatGPT

When ChatGPT burst into public consciousness in late 2022, it signaled the next round of the "People vs. Machines" debate—which has always been especially lively in the customer service space. It was widely acknowledged that the only thing worse than an unhelpful agent is not being able to reach one at all.

The future remains uncertain, but the past offers valuable insights. Leveraging previous experiences can guide us in effectively blending technology and humanity in the wake of ChatGPT.

Tech innovations bring new efficiencies, and it's natural for companies to attempt to extend that value beyond its limits. It's tempting to believe that a new tool or capability can overcome the limitations of human agents without significantly affecting service quality. Offshore call centers and early online chatbots are examples of such attempts. While they have their advantages, they also have limits that we should acknowledge and learn from.

Realizing Potential

In the present day, ChatGPT and other AI-based innovations hold the potential to align the customer service experience with the consumer experience we now take for granted. Ordering a product takes only minutes, and delivery occurs within hours. In contrast, customer service often remains slow and frustrating.

The maturing AI technologies can change that. The focus should be on understanding what these technologies truly are—turbo-charged data-processing prediction machines—and recognizing what they are not—complete substitutes for human intelligence.

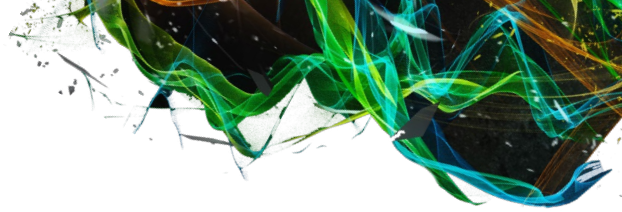
AI is often surrounded by hype, but at its core, it's simply a model proficient in making predictions.

When a request is made, the model searches available data to identify positive outcomes from similar past situations. It then analyzes the preceding conditions or actions that led to those positive outcomes. This intelligence can be applied to the current request, predicting the conditions or actions that will likely result in a positive outcome. Over time, these machine learning models accumulate vast amounts of data, enhancing the reliability of their predictions.

Accent on Familiarity

In the early 2000s, the drive to reduce costs led to a significant innovation: shifting call center operations to lower-wage countries with English-speaking labor forces. Financial services providers, consumer goods manufacturers, and other organizations undertook this move. However, valuable lessons were learned. While cost reduction was achieved, customer trust could be compromised due to deep-seated human biases—not because of poor performance.

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Trust has always been vital in customer service. Contact centers located in the American Midwest thrived due to the region's neutral accent, instilling confidence in customers. More recently, companies using "conversation bots" with region-specific accents have observed higher rates of first-call resolution.

Nevertheless, offshoring has faced challenges stemming from human bias over the years. Studies indicate that people subconsciously discount information from those who sound different. Even when capable and well-trained foreign-accented agents handle service calls, customers often feel disrespected.

Despite efforts to make conversation bots sound familiar, they remain noticeably non-human. Introduce a complex or unexpected question, and the limitations of chatbots become apparent. Similar to earlier chatbots, conversation bots excel at handling straightforward self-service requests but fall short as substitutes for live agents in nuanced situations requiring judgment.

Judgment at the Core

Judgment, a distinctively human capability, lies at the heart of customer service. It is recognizable when present and conspicuous in its absence. Initial interactions with ChatGPT have demonstrated its potential to evoke alarm rather than reassurance. For instance, a journalist from The New York Times engaged in an in-depth interaction with Microsoft's AI-powered Bing search engine and described "feeling deeply unsettled and frightened." The journalist likened the experience to conversing with a "cheerful but erratic reference librarian" mixed with a "manic-depressive teenager, concluding that "it was not ready for human contact, or perhaps humans were not ready for it." Such examples suggest that AI-based tools are still a work in progress, requiring bug fixes and the establishment of boundaries before most people accept them as legitimate and trustworthy.

While using a chatbot to book a hotel room may suffice for efficient transactions, recent experiences have shown the risks involved. Let's say someone booked a hotel room through a fraudulent website, but upon arrival the hotel did not recognize the bogus confirmation number.

A normal reaction would be to contact the credit card provider's customer service to cancel the fraudulent charge and then search for another hotel room. For these calls, people want to bypass the chatbots and seek assistance from live agents. Their uniquely human capacity to comprehend the context and urgency of this type of predicament allowed them to treat these requests with empathy and flexibility, qualities completely absent in chatbots.

Blending Technology and Humanity

Consumers desire efficiency, accuracy, and trust, but not always in the same order or at the same time. The circumstances dictate which priority takes precedence in any given situation.

Furthermore, leveraging AI's capabilities can enhance support for human agents dealing with high-stakes interactions.

Significant benefits lie ahead as long as AI is deployed in conjunction with human agents, rather than replacing them entirely.

As AI continues to mature, contact centers should assign transactional and computational tasks to chatbots while reserving more complex requests for human agents.

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