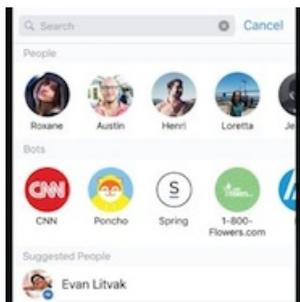


MOBILE

Can brands turn real-time Facebook Messenger chats into meaningful engagements?

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Branded chatbots arrive on Facebook Messenger

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Staples, Fandango, 1800Flowers and CNN are among the first brands to reach out directly to Facebook Messenger's large audience as part of a chatbot push announced April 12 at an annual meeting Facebook holds for its developers.

Messenger's push into branded mini interfaces called chatbots via the new Bots on Messenger platform follows several weeks of escalating news around the quickly growing space for marketers to communicate directly with users of a variety of messaging apps, including Kik, Slack and others. From being able to buy flowers to finding a nearby movie or getting sales assistance for office supplies, Messenger users will now be able to interact with brands without having to leave the app.

"We think that you should be able to message a business the same way that you would message a friend," said Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, during yesterday's keynote address to attendees of the company's F8 developer conference. "You should get a quick response and it shouldn't take your full attention like a phone call would and you shouldn't have to install a new app.

"So, today we are launching Messenger Platform so you can build bots for Messenger," he said. "It is a simple platform that is powered by Artificial Intelligence, so you can build natural language services to communicate directly with people.

"Messenger is going to be the next big platform for helping you share privately and for helping you connect with services in all kinds of new ways."

Chats outnumber SMS messages

Messenger was the fastest growing app in the United States last year, now boasting more than 900 million monthly users, per Mr. Zuckerberg.

Between Messenger and Facebook's other messaging app, WhatsApp, users send approximately 60 million messages a day, pointing to the scale of over-the-top messaging apps.

"To put that in perspective, at its peak, global SMS volume was at about 20 million messages a day," Mr. Zuckerberg

said. "We are processing about three times as many messages as SMS ever did and these services are still growing incredibly quickly."

□

Staples on Facebook Messenger

It is this scale that is attractive to marketers trying to reach mobile users. Chatbots use Artificial Intelligence to automate the process while using natural language to interact with users.

Many of the initial integrations are pairing a chatbot with live customer support.

CNN's integration with Messenger enables users to receive a daily digest of stories right into the app. The more the chatbot is used, the more personalized the selection of content will be. Users can also send a message to learn more about a specific topic.

Ordering flowers

Gift retailer 1800Flowers is blending a chatbot with live customer service support to answer Messenger users' questions, make gifting suggestions, process orders, send shipping updates and provide gift reminders.

"If you want to send flowers, you don't have to install a new app or enter your credit card again just send a message," Mr. Zuckerberg said.

"I find it pretty ironic because now, to order from 1800Flowers, you never have to call 1800Flowers again," he said.

□

1800Flowers on Facebook Messenger

Staples has implemented Facebook Messenger functionality on its own mobile site, enabling the use of Messenger to chat with sales specialists and customer service to get shopping assistance and post-sales support. Customers can also opt-in to receive personalized updates such as order confirmations and shipping notifications directly in Messenger.

At launch, the features are only available on Staples' mobile site but will be rolled out to tablet and desktop users in the future.

Chatbots gain quickly

The Fandango Bot for Messenger will act as a virtual concierge, providing a resource for movie information, trailers and direct access to Fandango ticketing through Facebook. It is expected to launch next month in time for the summer movie season.

The integration will complement Fandango's already-strong presence on Facebook, where it has more than 2 million followers, offers a number of channels on Facebook Notify and is an early adopter of Facebook Live video.

Other integrations with Facebook Messenger announced yesterday include Newegg, Shopify, Salesforce, Sparkcentral and HealthTap.

The move toward branded chatbots is quickly growing ([see story](#)).

Last week, H&M, Sephora and Weather Channel were among the first brands to appear in messaging application Kik's new Bot Shop marketplace, potentially driving discovery and use as chatbots gain steam ([see story](#)).

The trend points to how mobile is enabling consumers to communicate with brands in real-time. For brands, they will need to figure out how best to provide value to users while simultaneously encouraging deeper brand engagements.

"The fact that automated messages will be structured to help customers engage in very specific ways for example, make a reservation at a restaurant, track an out-of-stock retail item is definitely beneficial to brands," said Jeff Piazza, co-founder and UX director at [Behavior Design](#). "The true value of the chatbot will surface when it can perform like a trustworthy ambassador for a brand.

"Given how integrated Facebook Messenger is with users there is an opportunity to make that experience feel more customized," he said. "Not only functioning as a convenient utility to answer customer questions but providing a empathy for the customer's unique situation and addressing those needs at a personal scale.

"The AI and chatbot trend is meaningful because it indicates consumer desire to communicate more frequently with brands, in real-time. The challenge will be taking this beyond the surface level inquiry - directing consumers to content that is custom and long form, as well as finding ways to transition a user from a Facebook chatbot to a more authentic brand experience."

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