

RETAIL

Chat can let brands solve customers' problems organically and pain-free

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It's far easier for customers to send a message asking for what they want than going through other channels. Image credit: Four Seasons

By DANNY PARISI

NEW YORK Successfully implementing chat features into a brand's mobile presence can help build a personal connection with customers as well as streamline much of the process of interacting with those customers.

Speaking at Luxury Interactive 2017 Oct. 18, a senior executive from Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts outlined the ways in which the company has used mobile chat features to connect with customers. The verdict is that when chat is used as a service tool and not a sales tool, it can be incredibly valuable for both the customers and the brand.

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"Chat as a platform has exploded in terms of growth," said Christopher Cocca, senior director of digital at **Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts**. "I would argue that mobile is still a strong communication device but communication has changed."

Messaging first

Chatbots and chat services are a hot button topic in today's retail world.

As customers now have a mobile device available to them at all times and application installs are slowing down, messaging has emerged as a quick way to communicate with customers and allow them to communicate with brands at anytime.

Mr. Cocca explained that Four Seasons has been using dedicated chat platforms to allow customers to quickly express what they need so the hotel can respond just as efficiently.

As an example, Mr. Cocca hypothesized a visitor that is on her way to a hotel. She is jet-lagged and tired and she wants a burger and a beer waiting in her room for her.



Messaging is more convenient and less effort for customers. Image credit: Four Seasons

She could go in-person to the front desk and ask, she could call ahead or she could navigate through a mobile app to order her food. Each of these would take significant effort, including entering complicated information or waiting on hold on the phone.

Instead, through a chat platform, the traveler can fire off a quick message to a hotel associate who will finish the rest of the process for her.

"Is this a service tool or a sales tool?" Mr. Cocca asked. "For us it's a service-oriented tool.

"The number of people who come to our Web site and don't book because of price is significant. Sales is wasteful since a lot of people will just message to ask the price and then not move forward whereas providing service to people who already booked works much better."

Sales vs service

A quick survey of the luxury world shows a number of brands embracing chat.

Cosmetics brand Este Lauder is launching a conversational chatbot through Facebook Messenger that will let customers virtually try on its products through augmented reality.

The chatbot will offer recommendations and answer questions as customers search for lipstick and other cosmetics. Additionally, technology from ModiFace will let customers project an augmented reality version of Este Lauder products onto her face using a smartphone's camera ([see story](#)).

British fashion retailer Matchesfashion.com has unveiled a new interactive and curated guide called The Style Daily.



Giving customers options is key to keeping their attention. Image credit: Four Seasons

The feature combines elements of chatbots, editorial content and online shopping into a unique stream of recommended products. Uniquely, the content provided by The Style Daily is available only through the retailer's mobile application, emphasizing the primacy of mobile in the modern digital landscape ([see story](#)).

Four Seasons' Mr. Cocca emphasized chat's ability to work as a sales tool as well. Mr. Cocca used another example of a customer who booked a room at Four Seasons through Expedia but was brought into the Four Seasons' system through chat.

"It allows us to solve problems more organically and individually," Mr. Cocca said. "Through this conversation, we took a customer who booked with us from a third party and built a more personal relationship with them."

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