

MARKETING

Chatbots require constant maintenance or risk becoming brand liability

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Chatbots can be a boon for brands, but they must be maintained. Image credit: Estée Lauder

By DANNY PARISI

Chatbots are becoming invaluable to customer service departments, but brands must be aware that virtual assistants need to be maintained, updated and not left stagnant.

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The use of chatbots can be a valuable addition to any brand's ability to interact with customers, which is why so many marketers have embraced them since their inception. But marketers need to understand that chatbots should evolve with consumers and with the new services and items that brands offer.

"Most companies simply design their chatbot at the beginning based on the top 10-20 frequently asked questions and then turn on the bot without ever making adjustments moving forward," said JC Ramey, CEO of [DeviceBits](#), Columbus, OH.

"However, when this is the case, the bot never learns different ways that customers ask their questions over time, nor do they update it to reflect new software upgrades or later versions of products, such as a new smartphone that gets a new operating system or new features on a new device model," he said.

Chatbot efficiency

Chatbots burst onto the scene in the last few years, after they began to gain popularity through applications such as Facebook Messenger and iMessage.

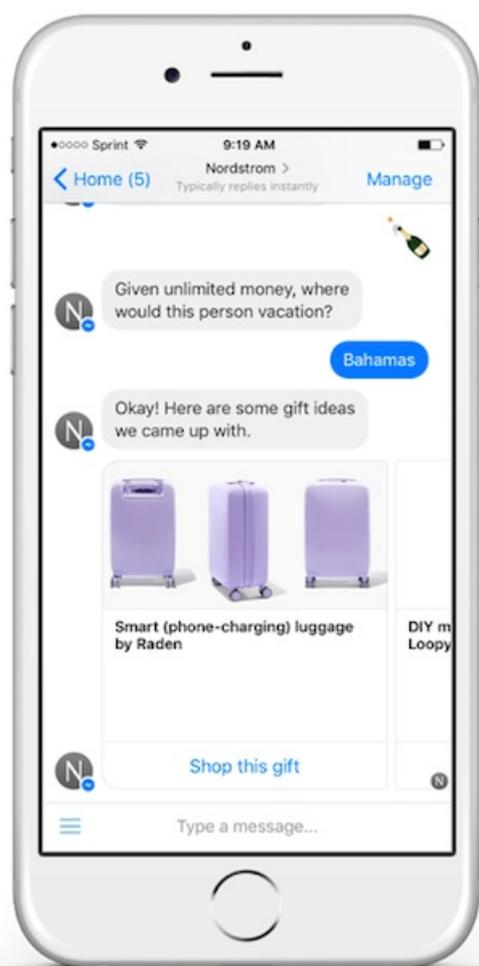
Their popularity is understandable. As customers seek to become informed about the company and the products they wish to buy, customer service teams can quickly be overwhelmed.

With chatbots, these inquiries can be handled automatically, allowing the personnel of a customer service team to focus on the more complex requests.

But for many brands, they program a few common questions into the chatbot and then leave it alone. This is a detrimental habit and one that brands need to kick.

"Companies should focus on initially designing the chatbot based on real-time customer interactions with call-

center agents, including which downloadable self-support materials are utilized most by customers," DeviceBits' Mr. Ramey said. "These companies study which self-support materials customers download to determine and prioritize question/content."



A Nordstrom chatbot. Image credit: Nordstrom

The first step then is to determine the most-common ways in which customers interact with regular customer service. Once that is done, brands can move on to programming the chatbot.

But the work does not stop there. Machine learning and AI technology can help chatbots learn customer behavior and further refine its process of understanding and responding to customer queries.

Then, brands need to make sure they are constantly updating and tweaking the chatbot to work the way it should in the most up to date way. If chatbots are left without updates, they may give customers wrong information, be unable to answer questions they should know and, in general, provide a suboptimal experience.

"As customers interact with these self-support materials, internal algorithms learn over time (machine learning) what's important and less important," Mr. Ramey said. "The machine algorithms even study 'how' people ask their questions to the bots online to determine better natural-language processing.

"As an example, systems designed by DeviceBits can even use algorithms to determine when a question is mature enough to be automated and handled by a chatbot as opposed to a live agent in a call center," he said.

"Rather than just build a chatbot Q&A track on the 20 most popular questions, the right chatbot systems today take interactions from self-support materials, live agents and even social media as a training mechanism using natural language with machine learning on the back end for ongoing evolution of the bot's abilities."

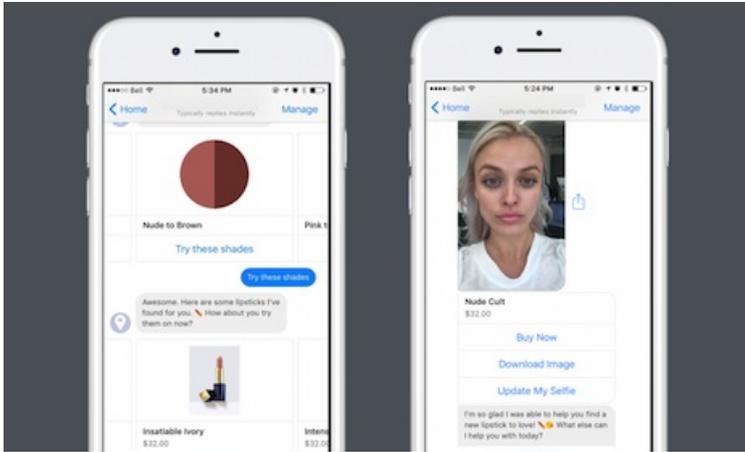
Continuous learning

As chatbots become instrumental for a variety of brand and retailer objectives, luxury retailers are tapping the tool to beef up this year's holiday strategy.

Travel retailer DFS Duty Free, Saks Fifth Avenue and Nordstrom are a few of the luxury retailers who are helping holiday shoppers with not just customer service but gift finding as well. Retailers who use interactive messaging services to help with the extra customer service inquiries this time of year, along with driving sales will win out this year ([see story](#)).

Brands have already begun expanding their chatbot offerings to include new features such as augmented reality.

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



An Este Lauder chatbot. Image credit: Este Lauder

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](#)).

Leveraging new technology to make chatbots even more effective is a great way to avoid falling into the common mistakes that brands can make when operating chatbots.

"Using continuous machine learning (based on constantly studying self-support downloads), more questions can then be added to the bot's repertoire," DeviceBits' Mr. Ramey said.

"Chatbots should also be designed so that when the customer isn't getting the answer they need, a live agent can step in without making the customer backtrack all the way back to the beginning," he said. "It is likely that brands will continue to embrace chatbots and they will hopefully evolve over this period of time," he said.

"The biggest question is whether brands will design and operate bots the right way so that they can maximize their opportunities with customer interactions, elevating satisfaction levels for the brand."