

RETAIL

Chatbots to help handle post-holiday deluge of returns and exchanges

December 21, 2017



After Christmas, brands and retailers see a huge spike in returns and exchanges that can be a hassle to sort through. Image credit: Simon

By DANNY PARISI

While the weeks leading up to Christmas are brands and retailers' busiest times in terms of sales, the days immediately following the Dec. 25 holiday are some of most active for returns.

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On Dec. 26th, brands and retailers typically see some of the highest numbers of returns and exchanges as consumers return gifts of wrong sizes and colors or make other corrections. For brands and retailers, chatbots can be one way of easily handling the increased load of Web traffic as customers float questions and concerns about how to return their gifts.

"Particularly during the holidays, when customer service inquiries can increase exponentially, chatbots, combined with self-support downloadable materials, can be a great way to handle additional customer questions and needs," said JC Ramey, CEO of [DeviceBits](#), Columbus, OH. "In fact, many of these self-support materials and chatbots are expected to be utilized during the Christmas holiday, when customer support centers are closed."

"By doing so, customers can still get answers to their tech support questions without needing to wait for call centers to reopen on Dec. 26th."

Day of returns

With brands and retailers expecting to see a huge influx in returns and exchanges, the amount of customer queries coming into the system can be daunting.

This is especially true given that today's consumers are accustomed to a customer service experience that is smooth and seamless with minimal hitches along the way.

For brands, one of the best ways of dealing with a spike in returns and requests post-Christmas is through the use of chatbots.



Hey

If it's a back-to-work kinda day, a new bag might see you through.



Photograph Michal Thomas

Matches Fashion's chatbot. Image credit: Matches fashion

Thanks to the automated processing of chatbots and machine learning, these programs can help sort through the customer requests that can potentially reach into the thousands.

Additionally, chatbots have the ability to upsell customers or direct them to other products that might interest them as well. This can be especially helpful for customers making returns as they can then be directed to other products that may be more suited to them than the one they just returned.

Luxury consumers expect high quality customer service, and chatbots can help provide that through machine learning that will let chatbots respond to customers' individual concerns.

Chatbots are an excellent way for brands to allow customers to sort out their simpler requests quickly and without taking up the time of human employees, who can prioritize more involved requests from other customers.

Digital agency DeviceBits tested a chatbot program that saw a 12 percent increase in agent accuracy and an 8 percent higher resolution rate for customers.

Chatbot tools

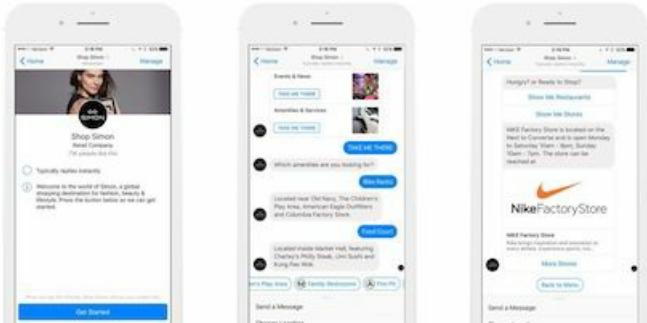
Chatbots are becoming invaluable to customer service departments, but brands must be aware that virtual assistants need to be maintained, updated and not left stagnant.

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 ([see story](#)).

But for brands and retailers that properly maintain their chatbots, they can be a significant boon to dealing with post-holiday traffic and a valuable asset for the future.

Mall owner and manager Simon is delivering personalized assistance to shoppers at its 208 North American locations at scale through a chatbot concierge.



Simon's chatbot. Image courtesy of Simon

Launched on Aug. 8, the mall chain's chatbot connects consumers with real-time information pertinent to their particular location through Facebook Messenger. Increasingly, malls are creating ways of bringing digital experiences to the bricks-and-mortar environment to ease consumers' searches ([see story](#)).

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

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](#)).

These varied applications for chatbots show that they are a valuable addition to any retailer's arsenal, especially in the busy times before, during and after the holidays.

"Brands will continue to realize the effectiveness of chatbots in the years to come," Mr. Ramey said. "They will continue to design chatbots so that they are able to be complimented by self-support materials and live agents, and they will increasingly utilize more natural language offering a more natural and personalized interactive experience for consumers."

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