

MARKETING

Facebook discontinues virtual assistant M, leaving other chatbots' fates uncertain

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Facebook's virtual assistant M is being discontinued later this month. Image credit: Facebook

By DANNY PARISI

After only a few months, Facebook is discontinuing M, its Messenger-based chatbot and virtual assistant tool, signaling trouble for the future prospects of artificial intelligence on the platform.

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Facebook has made considerable investments into the text-based artificial intelligence platform, encouraging many brands and retailers, including luxury players, to create their own chatbots and messenger programs using the social network. Now, in what looks to be a disquieting trend, Facebook is pulling support for its own chatbot assistant only a few months after it began testing.

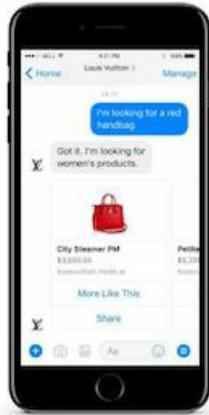
Virtual assistant

Recently, Facebook has been pushing chatbots as the next big thing in customer service.

Since their inception, chatbots have served as a way for brands to automate some of the minutiae of everyday customer service and free up sales representatives' time to handle more delicate or complicated matters.

Facebook even created its own virtual assistant called M that could handle all sorts of automated requests.

Unfortunately, M proved to be far too difficult for Facebook to handle. For one, much of the supposedly automated aspects of M were actually handled by real people while the Facebook team worked out how to make the chatbot smart enough to handle requests on its own.



Louis Vuitton's Virtual Assistant can help with product recommendations. Image credit: Louis Vuitton

After only a few months of testing, M has been discontinued.

This should be of concern to the retailers and luxury brands who have invested heavily in Facebook Messenger chatbots, a program that Facebook has heavily encouraged.

But if Facebook has such little faith in its own chatbot, the future prospects and support for third-party chatbots do not look good.

Chatbot support

This move came not without forewarning.

For one, voice assistants such as Amazon Alexa have proven far more successful than text-based ones such as M. Chatbots also require a lot of maintenance to effectively use.

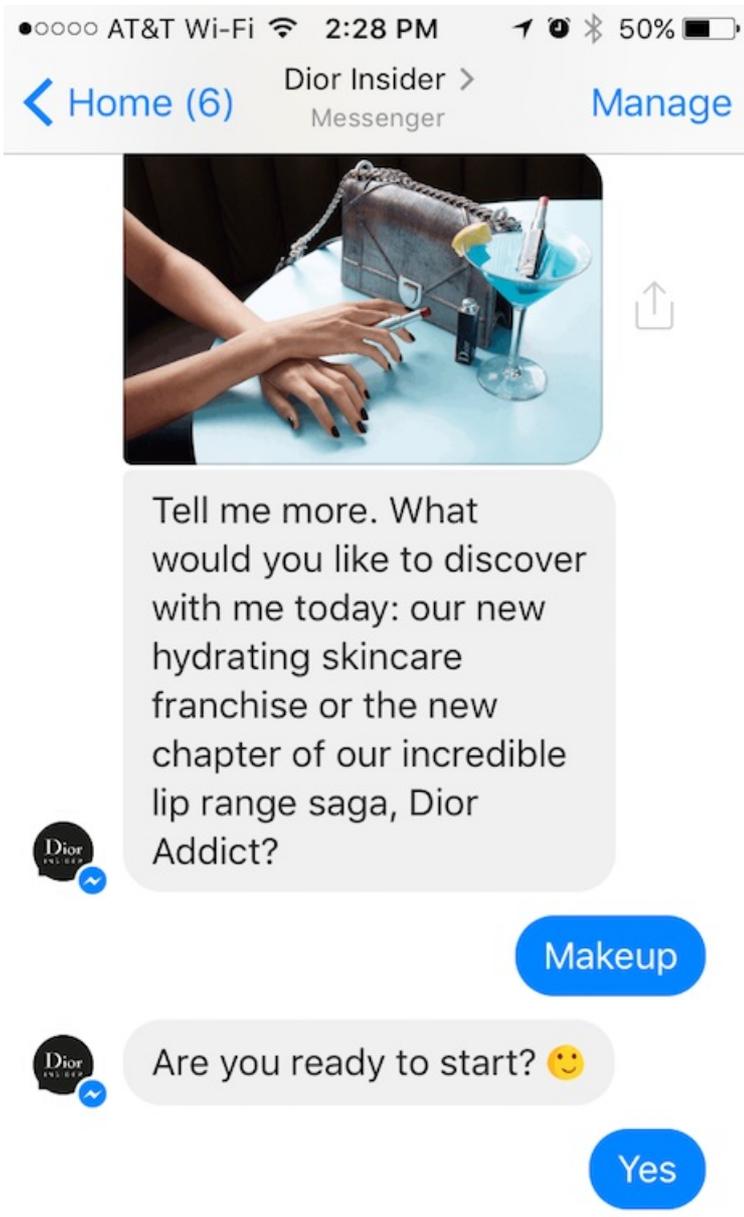
Chatbots are becoming invaluable to customer service departments, but brands must be aware that virtual assistants need to be maintained, updated and not left stagnant.

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](#)).

Luxury brands have already invested a lot into Facebook's chatbot platform, such as when French leather goods house Louis Vuitton extended the luxury experience through a Facebook instant messaging chatbot.

Louis Vuitton's Virtual Advisor is reflective of its dedication to maintaining direct connection with consumers throughout the purchasing journey. A number of brands have launched artificial intelligence-powered chatbots to guide consumers through the online purchase decision as well as respond to inquiries and recommend products ([see story](#)).

Similarly, French atelier Christian Dior leveraged Facebook Messenger as a method to dispel news and happenings with consumers.



Content shared by Dior Insider. Image credit: Dior

Dior launched its chatbot via Facebook Messenger, naming the virtual assistant Dior Insider. Similar to other brands' strategies, consumers interested in learning the latest Dior news or who have questions regarding a product can interact with an interactive chatbot software ([see story](#)).

The fate of these kinds of assistants is uncertain. This is also not the first time Facebook has heavily hyped a new feature to brands and gotten them to invest in it before unceremoniously dropping support of it, as it did with Facebook Live.

Facebook had been bolstering its live video feature by paying millions of dollars to publishers to create Facebook Live video content, causing media companies to build entire teams around creating real-time video. As first reported by Digiday, publishers are saying that Facebook is not planning on renewing any contracts for such a deal in the future and that publishers will no longer receive money from Facebook to create live video on the platform ([see story](#)).

How brands who make use of Facebook chatbots will respond to this new development remains to be seen.