

The Next Evolution of Chatbots: How to Ensure a Bold Bot Future

Is this the year you bring your bot to life?



The bot boom has begun.

When Facebook released their bot feature, M, the virtual assistant living inside their Messenger platform, it was billed as the next generation of how people connect and interact with the internet. Since then, over 18,000 companies have created their own branded chatbots with the help of Facebook's platform.

Never ones to miss out on a trend, Microsoft, Google and Apple have all been hard at work developing their own integrated chatbot features. Brands of all shapes and sizes, from American Express to 1800-Flowers to Domino's Pizza, all have their own chatbots, proving the versatility of the concept. As Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella said at the 2016 Build conference, "As an industry, we are on the cusp of a new frontier that pairs the power of natural human language with advanced machine intelligence."

Bots are the new black.

Many more companies are just starting to explore bots and how to implement them. And for good reason. According to Jon Moore, CPO of The Trainline, "Bots are the new black."³ In other words, bots are fashionable and profitable. Though we all use on average 3-5 apps a day, but it's becoming increasingly clear that their days are numbered.

This is because whether we perceive it or not, apps are complicated. Each app has its own interface to be learned and mastered, and moreover, apps create friction. Users must sign up and log in with each use. As app fatigue hits an all-time high, developers must find new and more intuitive ways to deliver their wares to their ever-evolving customers. And today, bots are where it's at.

Chatbots seem to be a natural fit for today's "on demand" consumer. Chatbots, or support bots as they are called when they are used to support and enhance the customer experience, offer instant answers and intuitive connectivity. They are always available, and the best among them can remember interactions to customize the experience, and escalate to humans if need be. Bots allow brands to field many more requests for information than they ever could via traditional means of customer service. Also, it's just a lot of fun to talk to bots.

Heed the warning of early bot failures.

First there were the bots that didn't exactly make the grade, the ones who will go down as the early failures of the chatbot-revolution. Many companies, excited by the potential they saw within the ever-learning and always available bot, weren't really ready for prime time. Hello Poncho for example, designed as a perky weather-telling bot, apparently had its head stuck in the clouds because the responses it provided users were interplanetary. Eventually users just gave up. Other early bot failures were slow to respond, and didn't interact in an easy, conversational manner. Experiences like these naturally turn users off to the idea of ordering sushi or getting financial quotes via bots.

So you want to build a bot.

Don't let these failures dissuade you. Technology has evolved, and so have platforms for building better bots. Choose one that's not only easy to implement, but allows your bot to learn from the very first interaction. This will allow you to get your bot to market fast, and it will continue to get smarter with every interaction, creating better outcomes over time. Six months after deployment, you and your bot can be sitting pretty, in the black.

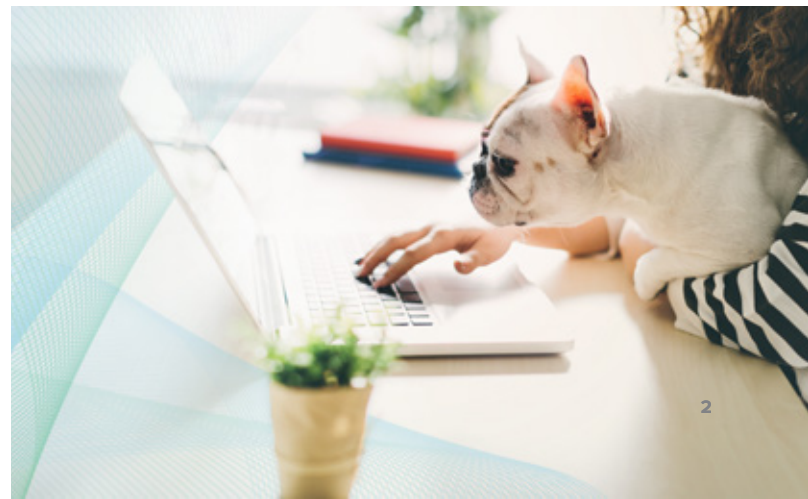
We studied the characteristics that successful bots share (and for the most part, the ones that the failures left out). When you decide the time is right for your brand to join the bot revolution, you'll know exactly which elements will help create a bot that your users will love to engage with.


“As an industry, we are on the cusp of a new frontier that pairs the power of natural human language with advanced machine intelligence.”¹

--Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella, 2016

“By 2022, over 85% of companies will offer some form of live chat on their website or on mobile devices to interact with their customers.”²

--Gartner, Making Live Chat a Must-Have Engagement Channel, 28 Sept 2017



A young woman with long brown hair, wearing a light blue denim shirt with a dark blue pocket, is standing on a bridge. She is looking down at her smartphone in her right hand, with her left hand near her ear. The background shows a large suspension bridge over a body of water, with a city skyline visible in the distance. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting sunset or sunrise. A decorative graphic of thin, curved green lines is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**3 tips to
creating
bots your
customers
will love.**

01

Find a real need, and make your bot fill that need.

Many brands love jumping on tech bandwagons. When apps were all the rage, each and every app developer found themselves inundated with app development projects. And when social media became “a thing,” even brands that had never heard of Facebook scrambled to open their business pages. Generally speaking, jumping aboard bandwagons like this just makes sense—and not doing so would mean falling behind the times.

But when it comes to bots, a better approach is to take a long, hard look at your business model. In some cases, like when it comes to ordering pizza, building a bot will create a more streamlined and intuitive experience—one in which users don’t need to leave the platform they’re already in. Not logging in and having to learn the interface means much less friction for the end user.

And because bots are built with the principles of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.), they have access to so much more information than a typical app does. The DoNotPay bot, billed as the world’s first robot lawyer, has helped overturn 160,000+ parking tickets in New York and London via its scripting language. Using natural sounding language, it simply asks users a few questions to determine whether or not they have a case for an appeal.

As Sar Haribhakti points out in Venturebeat, “From a customer’s perspective, it only makes

sense to adopt a new solution if it is significantly better than the alternatives—it’s not enough that it’s a trendy thing to do.”⁴ In other words, if you have an app that works well and is loved by your users, to pull any traction, your bot will have to be a whole lot better than that app. The take-home here? If you’re going to build a bot, make sure there is a need for it, and make sure it’s going to be better than your existing app.



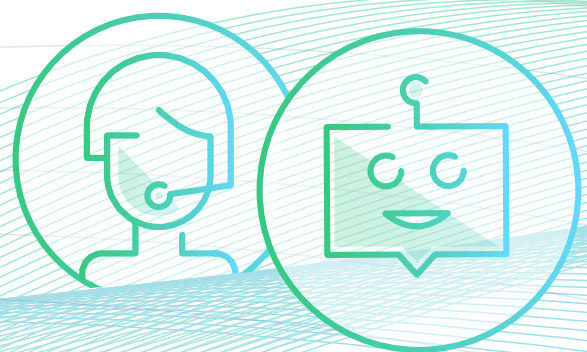
02 Involve humans in the process.

One of the main draws to bots is that their interactions mimic human interaction. So it would make sense to ensure that humans should be involved in the evolution of bots. But often, when developers and companies find technology that excites them, they give it more freedom than it deserves. Bots have a lot to learn from their human counterparts, and the cool part is that they really do learn, thanks to some amazing computer magic called deep learning. Deep learning is a subfield of machine learning. Machine learning refers to the ability that A.I. has to learn to do something without being programmed to do it. Deep learning takes that learning up several notches, and using an artificial neural network designed to mimic the human brain, is able to recognize speech, data, and specific patterns. (Computer science class is now dismissed.) Here are some things that upon-deployment, bots need a human role model for:

- Accuracy – Bots will ace most of the questions customers are asking most of the time. But that means there is still some room for error. Humans need to be readily available as backups whenever feasible to keep frustration levels hovering around zero.
- Understanding user language – Sure, bots were built to work with natural language processing, but that doesn't mean that they will grasp the meaning of all the nuanced things customers might say. Think about how immensely deep a

chatbot's knowledge must be in order to perceive the meaning behind, "Hey weatherbot, would I be better off with a coat or a jacket today?" But as mentioned above, because they are built with a capability for deep learning, by watching their human counterparts, they begin to understand the way we people-folk talk.

Also, at the end of the day, bots are just programs—as hackable as any others—as we saw with Microsoft's bot Tay.ai. As a result of a hack merely 48 hours after her release, Tay.ai started spewing some shockingly hateful rhetoric. The point is that developers make programs, and hackers delight in breaching them. So keep a close eye on your bots.



03

Create with user experience in mind.

Just because there is no actual user interface in the bot-o-sphere, (The interface is just whatever platform you're interacting with users on, like Facebook M or Slack.) you'll still need to think about how your users will interact with your bot. Each brand has its own unique voice. Why not infuse your bot with some brand personality?

For example, if your business centers around selling fresh roasted gourmet coffee beans, giving a bit of a hipster air to your bot's answers essentially builds it in as another branded touch-point, enhancing your customer's experience. If you have a tax question bot as part of your accounting firm's services, chances are you'll want to go with a voice that's a little more grounded (no coffee pun intended).

When it comes to building your bot, follow the "design first" rule, that is, to create the bot with the design, and ergo, your users in mind. From the first moment your brand begins to contemplate deploying a bot, you'll need to consider every possible interaction your customers might have with it, and make sure your bot has a learned answer for each scenario. Yes, it's true that it would be completely impossible to account for each and every scenario, but do your best to look at your bot from the user's point-of-view to cover as much territory as you can.

A few extra tips for building loveable bots.

1 Use natural language processing, not a rule engine.

Bots are useful when they make things more streamlined, and are less so when they are reminiscent of those annoying automated phone trees. Bots that use the principles of NLP for their scripting can store information about past requests and queries, and understand context behind words, making the whole experience more integrated and intuitive.

2 Iterate, iterate, iterate!

Nothing in life, especially in bots, should ever stop evolving or get too complacent with status quo. Make sure to keep testing and retesting your ideas. Don't be afraid to tweak a good thing in search of a great thing!

3 Embrace simplicity.

Follow the famed KISS (keep it simple stupid) rule of thumb. Don't try to get your bot to do too much at first. If it's overwhelming, your users will drop it like a two-week old burrito left out on a hot day. Try to use simple, concise language and stay away from jargon wherever possible. Strip away any and all extras to deliver a straightforward experience.

4 Bringing it all together.

The goal for building your bot should be all about solving user's problems in a straightforward and engaging way. If your bot can do this, it will be well on its way to becoming a valued player in your customer experience strategy. Six months from now, you and your bot will be all the better for it.

Sources

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