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Chatbots Helping Agents, Agents Helping Chatbots, and Customers Reaping the Benefits

How Blending AI With Agents Is Transforming the Contact Center and Reducing Costs

Bots Helping Agents, Agents Helping Bots

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Consumers have long been in the driver's seat when it comes to interacting with brands and companies; today, they just have more ways of connecting with them. Indeed, the explosion of social media and the continued adoption of an ever-growing number of devices have caused channels and interactions to proliferate.

While this would seem to spell opportunity for both customers and enterprises, it's not quite that simple. Customers are not going to be satisfied until their cross-channel journeys are seamless and their issues are resolved with ease. And organizations aren't going to realize the full potential of digital transformation until they can provide the swift, single-interaction resolution their customers demand.
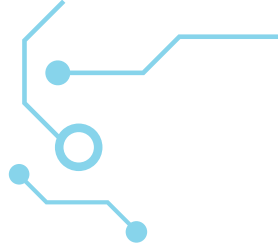
"

Not long ago **9** **channel choices** was the norm for customers;

today, that number is **11**

—"2017 Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Key Findings Report," **Dimension Data**

"Relevance in the digital age requires connections with customers that include not only multiple channels but the **interconnection of those interactions**."

—"2017 Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Key Findings Report," **Dimension Data**

Unable to simply keep hiring more agents, customer service organizations are increasingly turning to contact-center automation—specifically, chatbots, or virtual agents—to keep pace with this increased demand and complexity. Interestingly enough, though, while a majority of organizations (78 percent) surveyed for IT services company Dimension Data's "2017 Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Key Findings Report" predict that they will be offering fully automated customer contacts, a majority (70 percent) also predict that they will see an increase in human-assisted service.

The reason? Not all customer journeys can or should be automated. And the best journeys—organizations are increasingly finding—are those that involve chatbots (powered by artificial intelligence) and human agents working side by side to resolve issues seamlessly.

In this new AI-facilitated blended experience, agents train bots, and bots assist agents, to guide the customer on the shortest and easiest path to resolution.
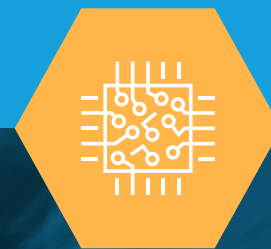
INTRODUCTION

While the promise of blended AI is enormous—resulting in better experiences for customers, reduced customer service costs, and the ability to handle increased interaction volume without adding more staff—unlocking that promise requires the perfect balance of automation and human assistance. And for that, you'll need just the right chatbot and integrated chat platform.

This is where things get tricky. With the chatbot industry still in its infancy and the number of offerings exploding, there are vast differences in the ways vendors are delivering these blended experiences and the quality of these experiences.

This guide will help you understand what kind of experience you want to create and the tools you'll need to deliver it.

"Technology's great new strength is in its growing humanity. Tools that interact with people, learn from those exchanges, and adapt for future interactions make the experience of using them all the more human."
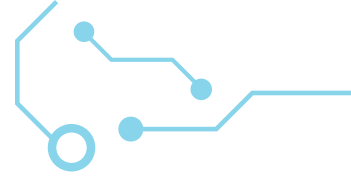
—"Technology Vision 2017," **Accenture**

The Beauty—and Peril—of the Blended Bot Experience

In the optimal blended artificial intelligence experience, a chatbot begins the interaction and takes the self-serve experience as far as possible. When the chatbot comes to a point where it does not understand the customer's intent, it either seeks clarification from the agent and then returns to complete the interaction, or it transfers the chat to a human agent with its relevant context intact.

Either way, the interaction is completed seamlessly, without requiring customers to restart their journey in another channel or to repeat information they've already provided. And in many cases, the involvement of the human agent will be invisible to the customer.

"Twenty-five percent of customer service and support operations will integrate virtual customer assistant (VCA), or chatbot, technology across engagement channels by 2020, up from less than 2 percent in 2017."

—**Gartner**

Bots are helping agents be more effective by predicting intent, suggesting responses, taking actions, replying automatically, and handling standard workflows. And agents are continuously training bots by tagging conversations and providing chat transcripts that bots can use to better understand customer intent and to deliver more helpful responses.

Finally, as bots become smarter, agents are able to focus their efforts on the complex journeys where human assistance is truly required.
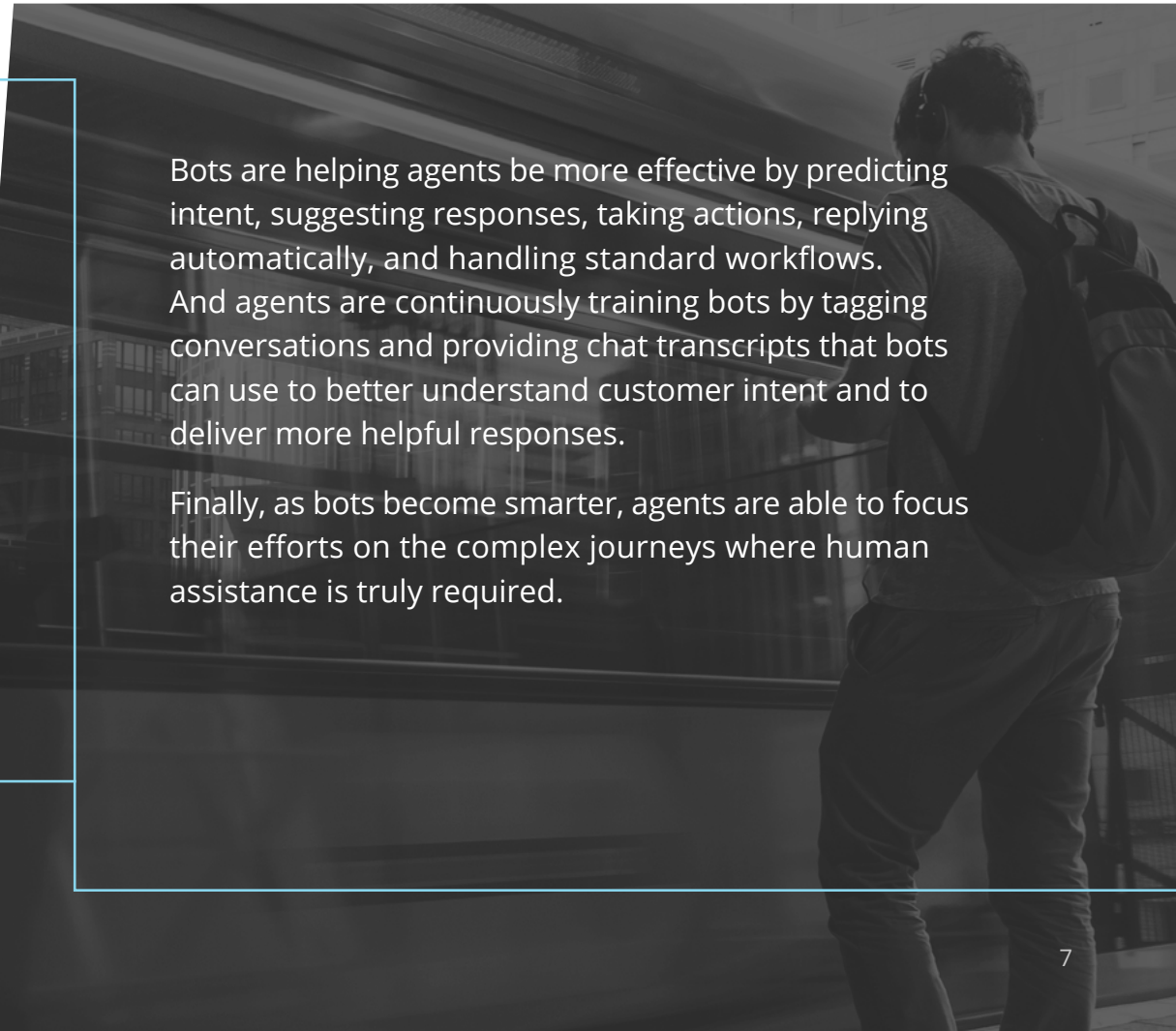
A More Perfect Union: How Wedding Bots to Agents Improves Everyone's Experience

Think about it. Being forced to answer the same simple question over and over does not make for exciting work. For contact-center employees, this is a real problem because when agents feel bored, they likely sound bored, too—and customer satisfaction scores can plummet as a result.

Blended AI provides the perfect remedy. By allowing chatbots to respond to mundane questions, customer service agents are able to focus on more interesting and challenging work. As a result, agent retention improves and your business benefits in a variety of ways.

70%

According to research firm Gartner, companies deploying chatbots have seen their call, chat, and email volumes drop by 70 percent and their customer satisfaction scores soar.[1]

5 Triggers for Chatbot Handoff to Agent

1.

Customer's request cannot be understood

"What's wrong with my account?"

2.

Customer's request cannot be handled via self-service

due to business rules or policies

"I want to cancel."

3.

Customer's request is better served by an agent

"My service isn't working."

4.

Customer's request involves a high-value transaction that a live agent needs to close

"I want to change my plan."

5.

Customer requests a human or sounds upset

"I already tried that!"

"The backlash when self-service applications don't work well is ... fast and furious. Understand what a customer wants to accomplish and let them do it fast, and you are gold. Fail to transfer information to an agent when self-service is not enough, and you are in the red when it comes to customer satisfaction."

— "Customer Service Is Getting Personal, and It's About Time," **Frost & Sullivan**

How One Bad Experience Can Turn Customers off Forever

When it comes to blended experiences, success hinges on chatbots and agents handing off interactions absolutely seamlessly. Indeed, according to a recent report from Publicis Groupe's digital agency DigitasLBi, **73 percent of survey respondents said they would never use a chatbot again if they had a bad experience during their first encounter.**"[2] And it's no wonder when one considers the consequences of less-than-seamless bot-to-agent handoffs.

If customers are forced to take action (e.g., leaving the window they're in) to reach an agent, or the bot transfers them successfully but with none of their accompanying information, you're actually worse off than if you hadn't attempted automation.

Your customers will be outraged because you've wasted their time with a cumbersome process that's yielded no results.

And your agents will be unhappy because now they must work to re-establish their rapport with frustrated customers before they can even begin to resolve the outstanding issues.

As a result, customer satisfaction scores plummet, conversion rates drop, costs go up, and frustration levels run high among both customers and contact center employees.

"Bad experiences are driving customers away—faster than you think. ... Imagine losing one-quarter of your customers in a single day. For good. Because that's exactly what could happen after just one bad customer experience. In the United States, even when people love a company or product, 59 percent will walk away after several bad experiences, [and] 17 percent [will walk away] after just one bad experience."

—"Experience Is Everything. Get It Right," **PwC**

Yet despite these dire consequences, many organizations are still feeling the pain of disjointed experiences. When asked how information is passed to an agent after a failed self-service attempt in their contact centers, 38.6 percent of respondents to a survey conducted for the Dimension Data report said that callers are still being blindly transferred to agents without any accompanying information.[3]

What's more, only 20.7 percent of respondents said that all information is passed along to the agent. And 20.7 percent also said that any information on why the customer was contacting the business in the first place is passed to the agent.

What a Seamless Blended Experience Looks Like Today

When it comes to providing a smooth transition between chatbot-enabled self-service and agent-assisted service, there's one rule that trumps all others: Never make customers repeat themselves. Beyond that, however, customers, agents, and enterprises see seamless experiences a bit differently:

Customers

A seamless experience equals a frictionless journey. It means never restarting an already initiated interaction or opening a new window to complete an interaction. It also means providing a familiar chat experience across all channels, and smart, seamless escalation to a human agent when necessary.

Agents

For contact-center agents, context is everything. Agents need to see at a glance what has occurred in the interaction they're picking up, or any chance of a smooth hand-off between bot and agent is eliminated. Being able to see this context on their computer screens (including previous interactions and history in line with the active chat interaction) makes it easier for agents to pick up where the chatbot left off.

Enterprises

At this level, a seamless experience translates to a single solution that can connect dots across channels and carry that context from voice to digital and from self-service to assisted service. This kind of integrated self-service/assisted-service strategy—which uses intent prediction to power every interaction—makes it possible for enterprises to handle more interactions more efficiently without increasing staff, and that in turn leads to reduced customer support costs.

Notes

1. "Gartner Says 25 Percent of Customer Service Operations Will Use Virtual Customer Assistants by 2020," Gartner (February 19, 2018), www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/3858564

2. "New DigitasLBi Research Shows More Than 1 in 3 Americans Are Willing to Make Purchases via Chatbots," DigitasLBi, www.digitasdose.com/2016/12/new-digitaslbi-research-shows-1-3-americans-willing-make-purchases-via-chatbots/

3. "2017 Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Key Findings Report," Dimension Data

Four Ways to Provide Blended Experiences Today and Tomorrow
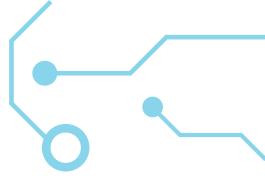
While the chatbot industry may still be in its infancy, the beauty of the chatbot (or virtual assistant) is that it's constantly learning — whether through AI, machine learning, or human training.

When chatbots become smarter, enterprises have the flexibility to provide the right journey for the right interaction — striking the perfect balance between self-service and assisted service.

They have the ability to improve that journey over time by chatbots gaining knowledge, by knowledge transfer becoming more sophisticated, and by agents becoming savvier in chatbot use.

The results: more relevant experiences and less work for the customer. Here are four ways to use chat — both automated and agent assisted — to achieve these results.

1

Bot is fully automated

Nothing pleases customers more than completing self-service interactions without requiring redirection or human intervention. In full bot automation, intelligent chatbots operate in real time and employ machine learning to predict user intent so that they can provide end-to-end delivery of a full spectrum of customer journeys, ranging from simple FAQs to complex conversational interactions.

Bot routes to agent

In this scenario, the chatbot initiates the customer transaction and then hands it off to an agent when:

- Bots capture key customer information or assist with the initial interaction until a predefined point in the journey (e.g., to close a high-value transaction routing to the right agent) is reached.

- The bot is unable to understand a request or "senses" a customer's impatience.

- The customer requests agent assistance.

Key to any such hand-off is context and an understanding of customer intent. In the right blended experience, this hand-off takes place without the customer changing screens or repeating information, and the agent is able to see at a glance all the relevant information needed to pick up the journey at precisely the point the chatbot leaves off.

3

Bot assists agent

In this model, the interaction between the bot and agent becomes a true two-way conversation. Not only is the bot able to turn to the human agent for needed answers, the agent is able to look to the bot to provide support at specific points in a transaction. For example, rather than searching a knowledge base and then generating a custom response, an agent could edit an answer generated by the AI platform and suggested by a bot—thus, speeding time to resolution. Best of all, the AI-powered bot learns from agents' customizations and improves the automated answers over time. As a result, both bot and agents grow smarter.

4

Agent supervises bot

In this scenario the customer may not be aware of a human's presence, but an agent is there nonetheless, silently supervising the bot and correcting its course as necessary. While this can be a powerful component of a blended bot/agent experience, it can also be used to mask weak AI capabilities. When deciding on the blended solution that's best for your company, be sure to verify that you're using this model to supplement the capabilities of an intelligent conversational bot rather than to prop up a simple bot incapable of predicting intent or completing complex interactions. At the same time, some enterprises use this as a "safety net" to ensure the customer experience is never compromised.

Telecom Provides Superior Customer Service at Significant Savings

When a leading telecommunications company was looking for a way to control costs without compromising its stellar customer service, it knew that automation alone could not provide the answer. Instead, it turned to a blended chatbot/ agent solution to provide a seamless journey for all its customers.

By automating common customer journeys and making them available through self-service, the telecom reduced call volumes. And by ensuring that any calls requiring escalation to a live agent were routed accurately with the full context of the previous interactions, they reduced average handle times.

As a result, the company projected $6 million in savings for the first year alone from routing improvements based on intent prediction, journey automation, and a better virtual agent experience.

Key Ingredients for a Successful Blended Bot/Agent Experience

When it comes time to decide on the blended bot/agent solution that's right for your business and your customers, here are some key things to look for.

Intent-Driven Chat Platform

In a blended bot/agent experience, the chat platform is the key, providing a crucial connection between agent and chatbot and facilitating continual training through collaborative tagging, machine learning, and more.
The right platform will also provide constant context, seamless hand-offs, and the tools required to build your own AI models or gain visibility into vendors' models.

AI-Powered Intelligent Conversational Bot

Enterprise customers need enterprise-grade solutions. This means foregoing simple chatbots (whose logic relies on keywords and sentences and can only respond to very specific commands) and instead opting for intelligent AI-powered bots specifically designed for enterprise customer service. Informative, personal, and transactional by nature, such bots should be easy to deploy across voice and digital channels. They should also use customer and internal data to understand what is being said, formulate a response, and determine follow-up actions.

Best-In-Class Integrated Human/Chatbot Operation

In the omnichannel world of the future, every channel should be the same channel in which users interact on their way to completing their journeys. This is impossible, however, if agents sound nothing like bots and bots aren't able to hand off context along with the contact. With the right integrated human/chatbot operation, bots and agents speak the same language and interactions are handed off seamlessly with context intact.

Prebuilt Knowledge and a View Into Data Models

Every organization is unique. This does not mean, however, that you need to start with an empty box (or a black box) when it comes to artificial intelligence. Instead, choose a vendor with experience in your industry that is offering a transparent solution with out-of-the-box intelligence about industry practices, terminology, and customer journeys. This way, you can start with blended bot/agent journeys around 15 or 20 customer intents common to your industry and then build on them using the models made available to you by the vendor.

Take Advantage of Industry Experience

By choosing a chatbot optimized for your industry, you can automate 20 percent of your customer journeys right away and then use AI and machine learning to automate 50 percent more of them over time.

Ten Reasons Why
a Blended Experience
Is the Best Experience

By letting customer journeys (and preferences) dictate the type of assistance provided—that is, self-service or agent-assisted—organizations are improving customer satisfaction and agent productivity. They are also reducing average handle times and providing better service without increasing costs or head count.

Here are 10 ways customers, agents, and enterprises are benefiting from AI-powered blended experiences:

1. Customers serve themselves through automated processes while also getting the help they want when they need it.

2. Smooth hand-offs between bot and agent ensure that customers don't need to repeat themselves.

Words from the Wise: How the Experts Weigh in on Blended AI

If it's not clear by now, it should be. Blended AI is the future of the contact center. But don't just take our word for it. Here's a sampling of what the pundits are saying about the blended bot/agent experience.

"Augment your agent workforce with internal chatbots … [but] don't fall into the trap of measuring chatbot success solely by deflection. … [Instead,] use the tools to provide new—and better—customer experiences. For example, since your human agents will be forced to handle more complex service issues, create chatbots that augment and support those agents."

—"Predictions 2018," **Forrester**

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3. Personalized experiences across digital marketing sales and service facilitate holistic journeys.

5. In-line, real-time context on customer behavior and journeys enables agents to pick up where bots leave off.

4. Agents can boost efficiency and better satisfy customers when they have easy and instantaneous access to information.

6. Agents can up-level their skills and focus on high-value interactions when bots automate simple tasks.

"Focus on worker augmentation, not worker replacement. AI's potential to reduce staff head count attracts the attention of senior business executives as a potential cost-saving initiative. A more informed expectation, however, would be for applications that help and improve human endeavors. ... Organizations that embrace this perspective are more likely to find workers eager to embrace AI."

—"Artificial Intelligence and the Enterprise," **Gartner**

Gartner

"The day when chatbots handle all customer queries and [when] contact center agents are completely replaced is very far off. ... The successful contact center of the future will be able to harness the best of both the human and automated worlds to give customers the service and experience they want."

—"Could Chatbots Ever Completely Replace Human Agents?" **MyCustomer**

MYcustomer

"US consumers appear to be warming up to the idea of using chatbots as a customer relationship management (CRM) tool, according to a new study from Aspect Software Research. ... Nevertheless, businesses must ensure that the chatbot experience isn't substandard, lest they risk alienating customers. Moreover, the automation service shouldn't be offered in isolation but be able to be seamlessly picked up by a human agent. ... [According to the same study,] 88 percent of respondents expect their chatbot interactions to follow them through their transfer to a live person."

—"44% of US Consumers Want Chatbots Over Humans for Customer Relations," **Business Insider**

BUSINESS INSIDER

7. With customer relationship management (CRM) and help desk integration, agents can look up, edit, and create new CRM records within the agent console, eliminating the need to toggle back and forth between systems.

8. More interactions can be handled more efficiently thanks to an integrated virtual agent and chat strategy.

9. Collaborative tagging powers workflow automation while training bots to continuously improve predictive models. The result: overall improvement in agent productivity.

10. AI-driven intent predictions power all interactions for better customer experiences.

Next Steps

Want to learn more about blending AI and Agents?

Check out our **on-demand webinar with Forrester Research**:

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE JOURNEY:
Blending Human and Virtual Agents to Optimize Results

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About [24]7.ai

[24]7.ai is a customer experience software and services company that is redefining the way companies interact with consumers. We help businesses attract and retain customers, and make it possible to create a personalized, predictive, and effortless customer experience.

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