

SEFAS INNOVATION

THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE - IS IT DETRIMENTAL TO CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE?

// WWW.SEFAS.CO.UK



There is no doubt that we are in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). Once a technological possibility for some industries, the use of AI is becoming ever more prevalent in our lives. Between our digital assistants, chatbots, virtual assistants, self-driving vehicles and recommendation engines across industries such as medicine, finance, insurance, manufacturing, marketing and entertainment, AI is transforming the way organisations engage with customers.

Applications of AI in a wide range of industries are not only time saving but are also having a major impact on customer experience, setting companies and brands apart with relevant and meaningful offerings. This can include tailoring specific services and solutions to individual needs, saving time and resource in marketing the right products to the right audience.

A recent report by [Forbes](#) found that 22% of marketers currently use AI-based applications and an additional 57% are planning to use in the next two years.

The question is: *does AI have a detrimental impact on customer experience?*

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

As with any new area of growing technology, not everything is rosy in the garden of AI. A report from the [Institute of Customer Service](#) revealed that [artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#) chatbots have become a rather unsatisfying experience for the majority of customers. The Institute found that if chatbots are poorly implemented and tested, they can actually damage customer experiences and business operations. It also noted that the failure of AI tech can affect customers' trust and satisfaction in using chatbots overall, whilst simultaneously impacting on a businesses' profitability.

Undoubtedly, technology can offer businesses genuine opportunities to serve customers better and reduce inefficiencies, as excellent automation and service are not mutually exclusive. But it seems that customer satisfaction requires the appropriate blend of technology and people to combine efficiency, empathy and responsiveness to personal circumstances.

THE QUEST FOR INTELLIGENT AUTOMATION

The sheer range of potential applications of AI within marketing alone is significant, from content personalisation, to automated social and message app interaction. Given the breadth and depth of possible uses, there is also the potential for misuse that can negatively impact customer experience.

For example, many organisations use automated chatbots on websites and phone screening systems as a means of addressing basic customer queries, and for qualifying prospective leads. There are probably very few of us who have not had a negative experience with such chatbots, sometimes going round in circles with a less sophisticated bot that simply isn't programmed to deal with the question asked, or one that simply won't take 'no' for an answer.

'Caution', therefore, seems to be the byword from both a business and a customer perspective. With many examples of recent fails in data protection compromising both business and customer security and privacy, there is an argument that says we shouldn't place all our faith in AI.



While intelligent automation can help organisations to alleviate repetitive tasks, how far should they go in humanising voices or personas, and what is the impact on customer experience of replicating human language through technology?

There's no doubt that consumers have become used to automated voices screening initial calls in industries ranging from banking and finance to healthcare and travel. But what are the implications of these voices conducting an entire call or, controversially, what if we think we're talking to a human, only to discover it's actually a chatbot when an interaction doesn't seem quite right?

The fact is, humanising AI has to be completely transparent, as anything less can mislead your customer and potentially damage trust in your organisation and its overall reputation.



DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF THE 'BIGGER PICTURE'

Customer service and experience is multichannel, and therefore AI-driven chatbots and other automated services need to be part of a 'bigger picture'. Despite its transformational potential, AI capabilities are often nowhere near as advanced as they need to be, therefore you should think hard about where to deploy and utilise AI build better customer experiences.

It appears that not every customer is willing to completely rely on chatbots, with a proportion who call businesses preferring to speak to employees, particularly when there may be issues that can't be clarified or resolved online using chatbots.

According to the Institute of Customer Service's report, 68% of UK business managers thought that organisations giving customers the option to speak to someone over the phone was still important. *"What we must never lose sight of is that both customers and indeed many businesses still see access to a human person as an essential option in the delivery of effective customer service,"* the report concluded.

KNEE-JERK REACTION

It is probably fair to say that, despite AI's unmistakable capabilities in modernising customer experience, its potential can be severely impacted by the knee-jerk reaction of some companies in a scramble to address customer service challenges in the new post-Covid-19 reality.

A lot of businesses that carelessly integrate AI into customer service treat consumers as numbers on a spreadsheet, betting on the accuracy of customer metrics and scorecards when configuring their AI-powered service workflows. As a result, customers are left with hollow experiences that are far from helpful or genuine, let alone satisfactory.

Convincing customers that AI is good for them isn't the problem. In fact, Salesforce confirms that 60% of customers welcome the use of AI in engagements if it means a better experience for them. But as the function of AI in customer service grows, so do customer expectations. Most importantly, they want the quality of their experiences to be consistent across every device – i.e. customer service that is omnichannel.

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

It's important for businesses to consider the appropriate use of AI and how its application will make consumers feel. In an era where we have become somewhat bogged down with tracking and analysing interactions to improve efficiency and results, balance seems to be the key. Business must not lose sight of the fact that they are dealing with people.

AI undoubtedly has an important part to play in helping organisations create better solutions to meet customers' needs, enhancing automations and complementing existing customer communications management (CCM) solutions and processes.

AI FAILURES

There are multiple AI '*fails*' when it comes to customer service. For example, Fabio the Pepper robot lasted only a week in his customer service role at a Scottish supermarket. Why? He confused and scared customers. Fabio's failure highlights an important lesson for AI in customer service — you can't bank on flashy tech alone to create a great customer experience.

This kind of AI customer service flop happens online and in apps too. Many chatbots have, at some point, failed to understand basic messages, or attempted to do too much at once. But chatbots have started to settle into their customer service role — alongside human employees, rather than instead of them. It's here that the failures, and the successes of AI, demonstrate that AI can't necessarily take over human jobs — but they can support them.

The key is to always to strike the right balance between human and technology and apply the best of both to optimise results overall. The use of AI to create a highly qualified, more receptive target list for a telemarketing campaign is a good example of the two working well in tandem.

Whatever technologies your business decided to adopt, you should never forget the importance of transparency and trust, or the power of a human response to customers' emotive needs.



AI isn't rising to supremacy in other areas of business, either. Take, for example, Amazon's secret AI recruiter, which had to be scrapped after showing a distinct bias against women. The problem is, artificial intelligence doesn't have a moral compass. It does what it is told to do but doesn't comprehend whether it's the right thing to do. Only the human touch provides that level of understanding, and it is humans that need to guide and support AI in business.

HOW SEFAS CAN HELP

For over 20 years, Sefas Customer Communications Management (CCM) solutions have been at the heart of business communication processes. Our CCM Marketing Tool, Harmonie Communication Suite (HCS), is a modular solution consisting of five CCM marketing tools based on a single platform.

HCS provides the tools to [create](#), preview, proof, and approve your communications as quickly as possible. It allows you to easily enhance the customer experience through every interaction across platforms including call centre, email, website, mobile, tablet, and print.

It allows all communication resources (logos, images, text paragraphs, etc.) to be kept in one central location, and enables users to easily create multichannel communications without having to rebuild content.

HCS will help to make your CCM marketing communications personalised, attractive and engaging.

