

Chatbots Can Save Companies Money, But Won't Replace Human Help

By: Rich Baker

Love it or loathe it, chatbots are coming to the contact center.

So, what's a chatbot? Think of Apple's Siri™ or Amazon's Alexa™, but with a text interface (instead of voice) that responds to your written queries with its own text, images, buttons, and links that you can click.



Chatbots are just one example of an ongoing artificial intelligence (AI) revolution. According to *Bloomberg*, AI-driven systems are projected to [add \\$15.7 trillion](#) (yes, *trillion*) to the global economy by 2030. So, if your company lacks an AI strategy, now is the time to start that conversation.

But as chatbots and the AI technology behind them steadily improve, will they eventually replace real, live, customer representatives? In short, not a chance.

Low-touch vs. High-touch: It's all about trust

Let's start with one of the biggest strengths of chatbots: They can be great at quickly locating and presenting good responses to transactional customer questions. Today's businesses should consider how to deploy them to handle these "low-touch" interactions. That means questions like, "Do you have that shirt in red and a medium?"

By routing simple queries to chatbots, companies can tirelessly service a flood of customer interactions at a low cost, 24/7, adding up to significant savings. In fact, a recent study from [Juniper Research](#) predicts chatbots could save businesses more than \$8 billion annually by 2022.



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But when it comes to delivering a "high-touch" experience, chatbots are no match to people. Emotionally-charged interactions that pose hard-to-answer questions or complex scenarios need to be handled by a flesh-and-blood customer service representative. A skilled employee can sense the customer's mood, diffuse emotion, and steer the conversation in a productive direction. Only a human can **build the trust** needed to deliver your company's brand promise in a way a chatbot cannot.

For example, consider the health-insurance industry. The typical annual enrollment process is filled with enough arcane terminology and endless plan options to give anyone a headache. An

insurance company that values the experience of its customers will recognize most of these complex interactions demand attention from empathetic human beings.

In the travel and hospitality industry, if your flight just got cancelled, a well-designed bot could present – nearly instantaneously -- a blend of flight or hotel layover alternatives attuned to your mileage status and lodging preferences, and do this much more quickly and effectively (“click on your choice”) than a human agent, who traditionally would recite to you the various options, one at a time. Bots can also trump humans when unexpected call volume overwhelms staffing levels. (Bots can scale instantly to address an unanticipated service interruption.)

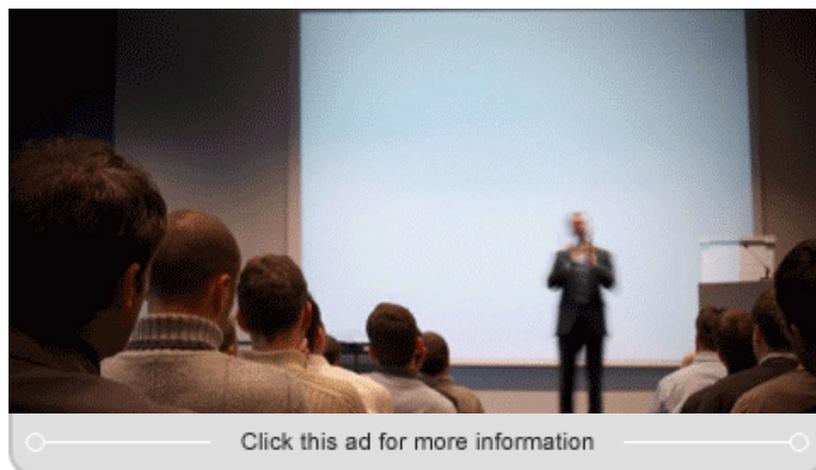
But if you’re searching for the perfect seaside expanse of sun and sand, would you prefer speaking with a person who has been there, done that – or text with an automaton?

Make no mistake: Bots can give quick and easy answers, but they cannot engage in **conversations that build trust and relationships**. Smart companies restrict chatbots to low-touch transactional interactions, reserving human agents for high-touch conversational experiences, enhanced with state-of-the-art visual engagement technology. Those industry leaders have seen their [net promoter scores soar](#).

Why the human element is so important

We all know the fingernail-scraping exasperation of an endless interactive voice response (IVR) menu. One wrong tap and its back to the beginning (or off to find a competitor). According to [a recent survey by The Conversation](#), a whopping *90 percent* of customers using a phone-based customer-service system just want to talk to a live human being. When confronted by an IVR system, most people just want to bypass it. Results of the same survey found that 83 percent of people engaged by an automated response system – including VR, chatbots, social media accounts, or emails – complete their journey by talking to an actual human being.

Having a living, breathing person behind the controls of a customer-service experience can make all the difference. That doesn’t mean there isn’t a place for automated or AI-driven assistance in your customer-service experience. It just means that you need to make sure a real human representative is easily accessible should your customers require one.



Blending AI into a great customer experience

Chatbots potentially offer a much-faster, much-media-richer way than IVR to triage and accurately offload low-touch queries from the expensive voice agent queue. But avoid ugly bot experiences by obeying two cardinal rules:

1. Always admit to the customer that they’re conversing with a “bot.” Knowing that truth can help diffuse frustration that may surface when the bot’s “AI” ain’t so “I.”
2. **Let the customer choose.** As early as practicable, present a one-click path to take the customer to a real human being.

If there's a queue for agents, you might consider having the bot offer to continue providing help during the wait. Regardless, be sure to present whatever the bot learns to the agent, so the customer need not repeat themselves.

A great implementation doesn't come easy. It takes a dedicated team, focused on the entire customer experience, to craft a design that leverages the best of what a bot can offer.

A great example is Intuit's SmartLook®-branded customer-support experience, which blends an automated chat tool with skilled voice agents, who are also equipped with Glance's visual engagement technology.

When an Intuit TurboTax® customer taps the "Help" button on their tax return, the SmartLook chatbot asks a few questions about the nature of their request and presents some links to relevant Knowledge Base articles. In parallel, the bot queries information stored in Intuit's CRM about the customer's prior purchases and support cases. This helps the system decide whether to post an option for the customer to work directly with a support representative.

Customers with simple queries – or those who like to "figure it out on their own" – can explore the bot's suggested resources. Those preferring a "human touch" are asked to enter their phone number. If the queue is empty, their phone rings moments later, providing a seamless experience from automated to human-powered guidance.

If an agent is not immediately available, the customer sees a timer counting down the anticipated wait time. The moment an agent is assigned, SmartLook alerts the customer to ask whether they still want to take the call.

Behind the scenes, the contact center's routing engine selects an appropriately skilled agent, auto-pops the customer's case object so that the agent can review any pre-conversation responses, and rings the agent's headset while also placing a call to the customer. The moment they connect, SmartLook's integrated [visual engagement technology](#) instantly opens a live view for the agent of exactly what the customer sees.

The customer could be on TurboTax.com, using their (desktop or mobile) web browser to do their taxes, or be using one of TurboTax's native laptop or mobile applications. The experience for customer and agent is identical for all cases. The agent sees exactly what their customer sees, making it easy to guide the customer through the experience.

Not personal enough? The customer can also see the agent via one-way video. Agents love this feature, as it helps diffuse any customer frustration, builds trust, and establish credibility in the customer's eyes.

This carefully crafted combination of automated and virtually-in-person assistance has been a huge hit. In its first season, more than 400,000 customers opted for SmartLook's video chat plus cobrowse. Another 600,000 used cobrowse with just the phone call.

By giving agents the ability to see their customers' problems on screen, the average time to handle each call dropped significantly. In other words, customers received the information they needed more quickly and efficiently through the SmartLook solution, without the need for a follow-up call. That's practically the gold standard for customer service.

Human touch is here to stay

Chatbots are certainly shaking things up, but businesses need to remember that AI will never truly replace human touch. That's especially the case when responding to complex questions or high-value transactions.

The SmartLook system uses a chatbot to serve up useful answers to basic questions, but it's only the first line of service. The kind of help that only a human can provide is a simple click or tap away. And by leveraging state-of-the-art visual engagement technologies, such as Glance's cobrowse, screen sharing and video chat, a human agent can visually guide TurboTax customers, whether

they're using a computer or a mobile device.

Long story short? The best customer engagement processes use the latest technologies to enable, extend and **improve** human interactions, not replace them.

To take advantage of the AI trend, integrate a chatbot into your company's low-touch interactions. But always ensure that your customers can quickly and easily escalate to a well-trained, visual technology-enabled customer service rep for a high-touch, high-value conversational experience that can build lifetime customer value.