Will AI be the Savior of the Customer Experience?

By: Alan Coleman

In the past few months, there has been a lot of talk – and it has to be said, also a lot of hype – around how artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning and data analytics will transform our lives. The idea behind this is that organizations are increasingly able to gather vast amounts of data about their customers from a multitude of online and offline sources, and that analyzing this data with the help of AI algorithms will ultimately help them understand, and even predict with accuracy, what their customers want, enabling them to anticipate and address each customer's specific needs and to fulfill each customer's expectations, every time.

Taking this further, and also with the help of AI, organizations are hoping that they will be able to automate some standard customer interactions, providing a faster and more straightforward customer experience while saving time and resources. We've already seen the impact of natural language technologies such as Alexa and Siri, and communicating with a chatbot may eventually become the new normal rather than the exception. According to a recent survey by BriteBill, younger customers especially are more open to interacting with automated systems. In the survey, half of Generation Z respondents – that's the current generation of 16-22 year-olds – said they would like access to a chatbot for bill inquiries, and a third agreed that chatbots are a good alternative to traditional customer care lines.

So, the future is looking bright. However, organizations must tread carefully to ensure that automating a percentage of their customer interactions is compatible with the equally important goal of providing a truly personalized customer experience. Technology on its own is not always the answer: When it comes to handling some of the more complex inquiries and customer issues, at least for now, a helpful human will still provide a better customer experience than a robot. If communications service providers become too technology-oriented, they may risk alienating their customers. The key therefore is to automate where the benefits are clear, but to not get swept away by technology for technology's sake.

The reality is that AI is still very much in its infancy and telecoms providers are only just starting to apply these technologies to customer relationship and customer care scenarios. We are also talking about AI here rather than Artificial General Intelligence or AGI – which is technology that will be much more human like in how it interprets facts and sentiments, but is still only being developed and even further away from being applied in real-life scenarios.

In most cases when it comes to the telecoms industry, AI is currently used to support live human-to-human interactions between a customer care representative and the customer. While the conversation between the service hotline and the customer is happening, the AI algorithm gathers and interprets all the data that a provider holds about the customer, such as the customer's history, his usage pattern, current price plan and other information. This is then presented to the customer care representative in real time with suggestions on what offers the customer he is talking to might be interested in, or what issues he might need to solve. By automating the data gathering and analysis, AI thus provides a consolidated overview of the relevant information, intelligently summarized, with the best action suggestions based on previous learnings from other customer interactions.

Being able to focus on the facts fast and ensure no important details are missed greatly simplifies the conversation between the customer care agent and the customer. The customer does not need to explain information that the telecoms provider should already know about him, and the customer care agent can get straight to the point and find the best solution for the problem. In this scenario, AI has a clear benefit as it helps the provider appear informed and fast-tracks the solution that the customer seeks.

Other applications see AI-based automation being applied to handling very simple, repetitive customer tasks such as chatbot inquiries about minutes or data used, or straightforward account management tasks. This type of machine-learned predictive and autonomous customer care can save the customer valuable time since he doesn't have to wait until the customer service agent is free to speak to him, and allows the provider to offer a further and more efficient communication channel as part of an omni-channel customer experience. After all, most customers want to save time and fix their problems quickly, so giving them additional automated channels for simple communication tasks makes perfect sense for both the provider and the customer.

However, the key here is that the robot needs to know when to hand the customer over to a human. Sometimes technology has to be overridden, and there will always be those more complex issues that are better managed by a person who can apply human wisdom and human experience to a problem. It's even better if that person is supported by AI technology and equipped with all the relevant facts. The process of handing over has to be entirely seamless for the customer, though – nothing is worse than the customer providing all the facts to a robot and then having to start explaining the problem all over again to the next person as he switches communication channels.

Of course, AI is getting better. As AI, analytics and machine learning technology advances, providers will be looking to apply these technologies in other ways too, increasingly using them to gauge customer sentiment, compare new problems to similar customer scenarios, and generate recommendations for each customer based on statistical learnings. Providers are already experimenting with AI on various levels including creating attractive marketing offers, establishing the best price plans for their customers, and answering simple structured questions automatically.

However, it is easy to get carried away with the possibilities that these new technologies bring. A high level of automation will only generate real benefits and value if it helps surprise and delight customers by providing them with relevant and attractive offers – and all this without appearing creepy. Furthermore, it would be foolish to ignore the risks that come with these technologies. Anything that is automated or machine-learned can also go wrong, causing the wrong message to be sent to the customer, or the right message to be sent at the wrong time. If not implemented carefully, there is a real danger that the provider could end up simply doing the wrong thing faster.

Caution is therefore necessary. Of course, innovation should not be stifled, but each step and new technology introduction must be assessed carefully for its accuracy and its value to the user, as well as its potential intrusiveness. The service provider's primary objective in all this has to be to understand what the customer is trying to achieve and how they can help them do this better, more quickly or for cheaper.

The customer should be the focus at all times and from the customer's perspective the technology should be flawless to the extent that it is unobtrusive. Customers don't need to know what technology is being utilized when they interact with their provider. All they are interested in is that they are receiving excellent service and support for whatever it is they are trying to do, on

whichever communication channel they choose.

It is also worth bearing in mind that customers have different needs and wants. While digital natives will probably embrace the opportunity to interact on automated channels, becoming too technology-oriented risks alienating those customers who are not ready for automated support, who find data analytics-enabled marketing communications intrusive or who simply prefer speaking to another human. Luckily, all of these preferences can co-exist happily. Service providers now have access to technology that enables increased automation with rich, individualized communications to meet the needs of the early adopters and Generation Y and Z customers, while at the same time continuing to provide traditional voice or web channels to those customers who prefer to interact in that way.

In the end, what it all comes down to is that customer communications are a very personal thing. The lasting impact of a poor customer experience is well documented. Providers should see the technologies, channels and methods available to them today not as selections, but rather as an arsenal of powerful tools with which they can build solutions to achieve customer delight.