Write the story of your brand as you engage with your customers in conversation

Synopsis

Depending on the time, the place, and the activity, there are different ways to interact with brands: customers can talk or write to them, directly or in a deferred manner. In 2020, the ambition of a CCaaS solution provider should be to reconcile these different types of interactions within a single conversation.

The channel should no longer be an issue. Rather than simply managing interactions, from now on we want to facilitate effortless conversations, i.e. make sure there is no interruption. Different channels can be employed, but the key is to create a coherent customer journey by mixing them if, or when, necessary.

Why? Because by giving the consumer the opportunity to talk to the brand (and vice versa) in such a way, it is possible to create and then nurture a relationship, which allows for some form of intimacy to take hold. The goal: consumers feel as much at ease with the brand as they would with a friend (making it easier for them to let the brand inform and guide them).

Over time, the brand will build a real story with them.

Table of contents

#1

Lexicon

Ambassador: any agent who interacts with clients remotely or in the field, including people who work on the move, and who embody the values of the brand they represent. They ensure that they provide each customer with a unique experience.

Augmented Agent: a set of devices that allow a CRC agent to be proactive and provide the best response.

ASR: stands for Automatic Speech Recognition. This technology is used for analyzing the human voice and transforming it into structured information that can be used by a computer system.

Knowledge base: a set of sentence components enabling a bot or human agent to reply or ask for additional information.

Callbot: an automated program for greeting, qualifying, and providing self-service phone channels.

Chatbot: an automated program for greeting, qualifying, and providing self-service on digital channels (e.g. on websites, instant messaging services, mobile apps, etc.).

Corpus: an organized and standardized dataset comprising users' requests, which are linked to a reason for contacting a company to create coherence.

CRC: Customer Relationship Center.

CRM: Customer Relationship Management. An electronic customer knowledge management system.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): the ability of a computer program or machine to think, learn, and mimic human actions and behavior.

Multimodal: the availability of multiple channels or possible interaction modes for an end-user in a customer relationship service.

NLU: Natural Language Understanding. This subset of natural language processing focuses on machine reading comprehension.

ROI: Return On Investment.

IM: Instant Messaging.

IS: Information System.

STT: Speech-To-Text. A technology enabling the transcription of a voice sound file into text.

IVR: Interactive Voice Response. An IT system that can conduct a dialogue with an end-user via telephone.

TTS: Text-to-Speech. A technology enabling a text to be turned into speech.

UX: User experience.

Voicebot: an automated program for greeting, qualifying, and providing self-service for voice assistants available on smartphones and smart speakers.

#2

Introduction

7:00 a.m. Half-awake, Emma looks at her Facebook news feed. She comes across a comment written by her husband, Paul, on a post about a film they watched with their daughter the night before.

She brings it up when he comes to the table. Paul's reaction? He asks their 15-year-old daughter, Jeannie, who has also seen the film, for her opinion. She barely even looks up from her smartphone. "Daddy, can't you see I'm looking at TikTok?"

They leave for work. Emma takes a streetcar; Paul takes a bus. During their commute, the conversation continues on WhatsApp. At the office, the conversation is interrupted for a few hours! It resumes during lunch before work interrupts it again. Just before leaving the office, Emma finds just enough time to email Paul a film review of the movie written by her favorite critic.

At home that evening, Paul, Emma, and Jeannie watch a review together and carry on their conversation, coming to the conclusion, that when it comes to comedy, everyone is entitled to their own opinion. The conversation may have ended, but this family's love of cinema hasn't. It will continue with the next film!

If you think the story above has little to do with the world of customer service and contact centers, think again! While it may put ordinary people at the heart of the situation, it's a vivid illustration of what a typical conversation looks like these days.
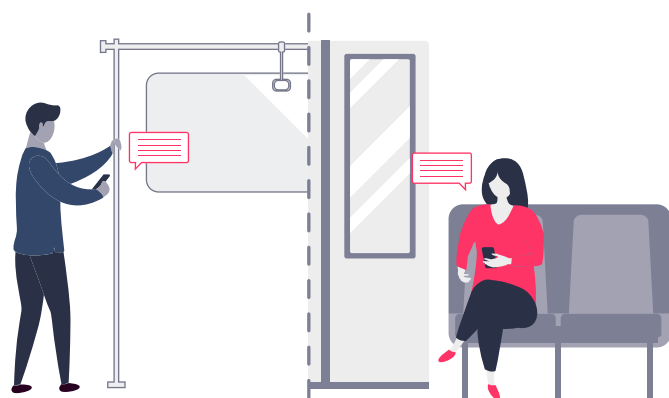
Many conversations, one story

There are an infinite number of conversations between a brand and their customers, and if one ends, the story continues! A range of conversations involving several participants and covering a number of topics is part of a brand's global story.

Switching from one conversation to the next can be the result of:

- Solving a problem,
- Moving on to another topic,
- A break.

Moving from a multi-channel approach...

Until the last decade or so, contact centers had taken a multichannel approach when it came to customer service. This meant offering customers a variety of channels to contact the brand (telephone, email, call-backs, etc.) as they appeared on the market.

Today, brands that still use this approach tend to be at the very forefront and offer the latest innovations in terms of customer engagement. The problem with this is that these channels exist parallel to each other, in silo mode, with no possibility of switching channels and often forcing customers to repeat themselves.

...to an omnichannel approach...

A few years ago, numerous brands logically started the move to an omnichannel approach. The objective? To provide a seamless experience across all channels and platforms by using centralized customer data to take into account previous interactions on other channels.

The idea is to ensure that clients do not have to repeat themselves when they switch from one channel to another. This way, any progress made on one channel would be taken into account on all of them.
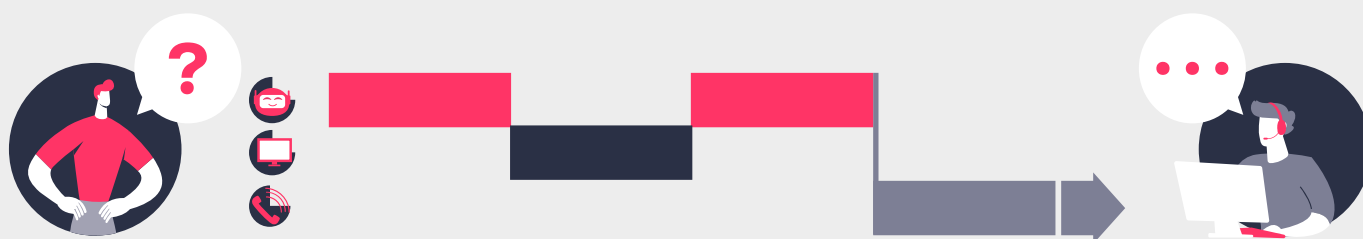
...and today a channel-less approach!

This unique approach completely frees itself from the concept of channels. It is based on the notion that today's customers only see them as the backdrop to their customer experience at any given moment. The channel-less approach strives to completely distance itself from the channel(s) consumers choose in order to focus on the ongoing conversation as they switch from one channel to the next.
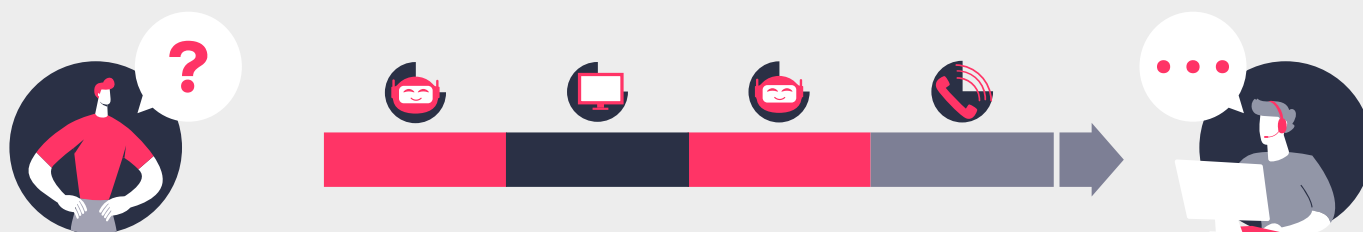
In an age when digital communication has become the norm and networks (whether 3G, 4G, 5G or WiFi) allow you to always have access to the Internet, it is possible to talk to brands anywhere and anytime. Whether you are in New York, London, or Singapore, in the office or traveling, talking to your smart speaker or cellphone, this digital communication allows you to reach out and deal with brands wherever you are in the world.

This means consumers can easily check a company's web page on their computer from home, start chatting with a chatbot on their smartphone during their morning commute, and finish their interaction on the phone with a contact center agent once they get to work. **What portable devices allow, consumers do!**

For the user, **it is a seamless experience** whatever the medium they use (laptop, cell phone, etc.), but for the brand it is the outcome of the enormous effort made to implement a truly channel-less approach.

What could be more human than a conversation?

It is human nature to discuss, exchange ideas, chat, and debate, all day long.

At Odigo, we believe brands should aspire to have as natural a conversation as possible with their customers, conversations that can be:

- Initiated by the client or the brand,
- Multimodal, spoken or written,
- Possible at any time, with a human or virtual ambassador,
- Memorable.

Nowadays, brands need to go beyond a mere omnichannel experience, limited to handling a sequence of interactions. Instead, they need to go further and **craft a vibrant story with their customer**! A story that starts at first contact.

To achieve this, companies can turn to a Contact Center as a Service (CCaaS) solution provider. **An experienced vendor will provide the company with a solution capable of managing these conversations in all their complexity, depth, and duration.**

#3

Customer-initiated (inbound) or brand-initiated (outbound) conversation

82% of consumers expect a brand to answer their questions in less than 5 minutes.
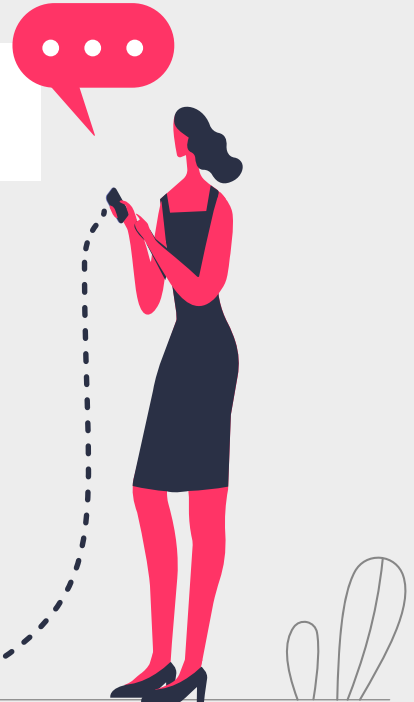
A conversation can be defined as an exchange of information between at least two parties. However, in the world of customer relations, it is an interaction between a brand and their customer.

More and more often these days, consumers are initiating the conversation. They decide when and by what means they reach the brand: this is called an **inbound contact**. This contact is particularly important because it assumes the existence of a need to satisfy on the customer's end.

This can be done by phone, even if the days when the phone was the main point of contact between customers and brands are over, the role of this channel should not be neglected. It can also be done via multiple other points of contact: face-to-face, social networks, email, and instant messaging applications as well.

This variety has also led to greater demands from customers. Did you know that when shopping online, 82% of consumers expect a brand to answer their questions in less than 5 minutes[1]? This means the magic word, at least when it comes to inbound contact, is responsiveness. However, consistency in tone and quality of response across different channels both play important roles when it comes to customer satisfaction.

1. "Connecting with Customers Report" 2013 – Live Person, Inc. et Loudhouse

From reactive to proactive

26% of global consumers report that brands gain presence with them through recommendations.

Brands also have another means of communication available to them: outbound contact. This is contact initiated by the brand, often **used for the purpose of developing or maintaining customer loyalty**.

Brands are starting to realize that by anticipating the needs, or potential problems, of their customers, they can **achieve a certain degree of trust and intimacy**.

The idea is to no longer simply be reactive, but to **become proactive**. By using outbound contacts wisely, it is possible to enhance the customer experience by contacting them at the right time and with the right message.

Take this example from the insurance industry. Today, all property insurance policies are required to include coverage in case there is damage during a storm.

However, a great insurer does not just compensate their policyholders in case of loss. Instead, when a storm is approaching, they anticipate it and conduct awareness campaigns where they provide good advice to their policyholders (such as: "Close doors and shutters", "Unplug your electrical appliances and television antennas", etc.).

They will anticipate the workflow and can work on prevention rather than passive cold calling. This does not mean they no longer utilize this marketing approach. Rather, the goal is to take care of their customers as much as they can.

And it's paying off! In 2019, 26% of global consumers report that brands gain presence with them through recommendations[2].

2 "Battle of the Brands: Consumer Disloyalty is Sweeping the Globe" 2019 The Nielsen Company (US)

So how do you find the best time to talk?

What customers care about is being able to easily contact brands when they need to. And what brands care about is being visible to their customers.

Today's consumers expect a privileged relationship with brands. So, it would be a shame to not seize every opportunity to establish a two-way relationship. This means brands need to:

- Take into account the moment and channel customers make contact (depending on the place, activity, etc.),

- Understand the conversation can also be initiated by the brand, by being proactive at the right time, with the right message and with the right person,

- Create confidence by recognizing the customer at each point of contact in order to customize the conversation.
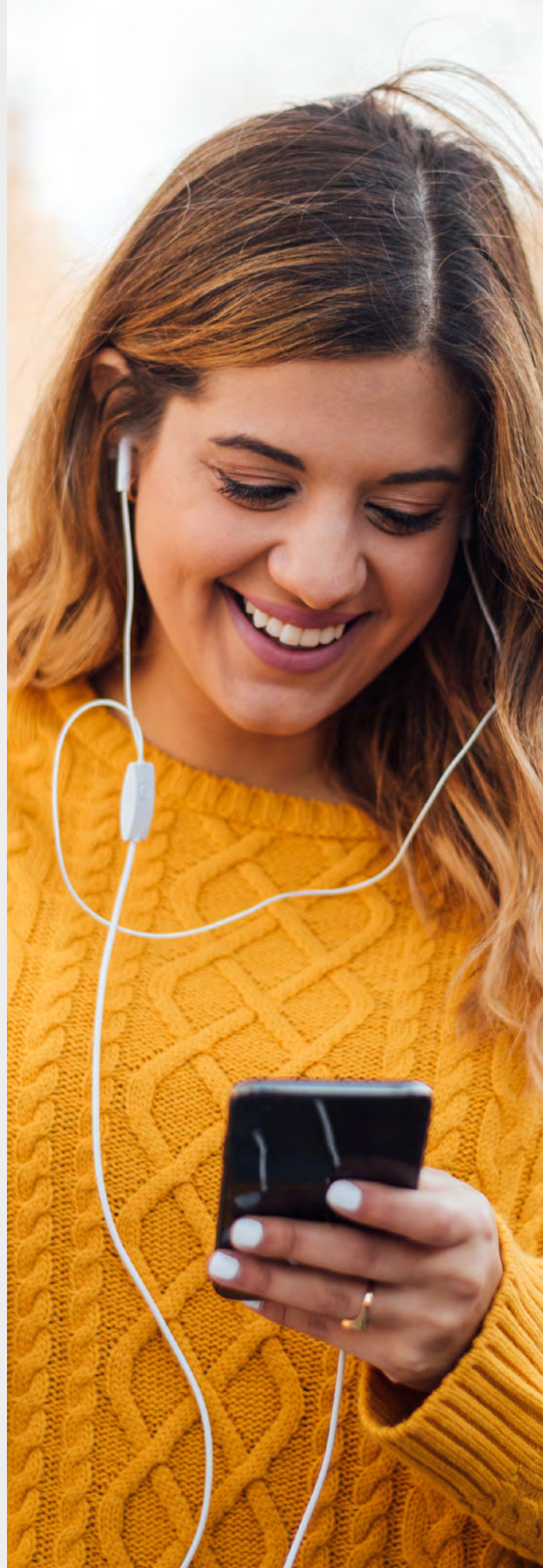
#4

## Spoken or written, there is only one conversation...

The most important thing when you have something to say is getting your message across! As we saw earlier, there are multiple points of contact available and interactions can happen at different times of day. **The aim is to let customers express themselves where and when it is the most** comfortable and convenient for them, whether it is by IM, phone, email, or text message.

The challenge for brands will be to **reconcile all these customer interactions into a single conversation and with a common story**.

Blurred boundaries...

Media and interfaces have undergone a profound transformation in recent years and one of the biggest trends is the growing use of VoIP instead of traditional phone calls.

Interaction can occur through VoIP or texting apps, or a combination of the two: just look at teenagers who are increasingly less likely to use phones to make calls, instead turning to instant messaging services to send each other voice messages.
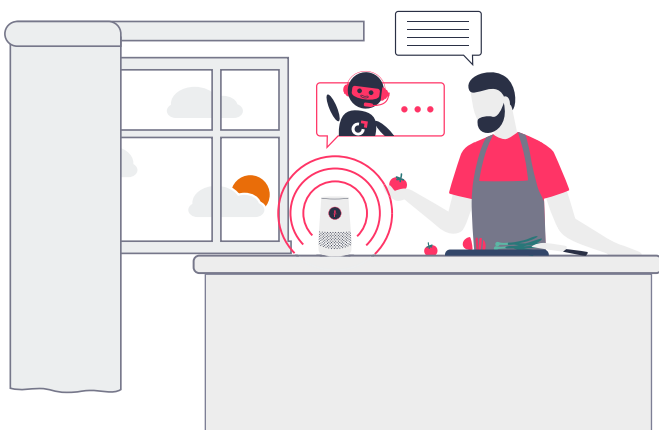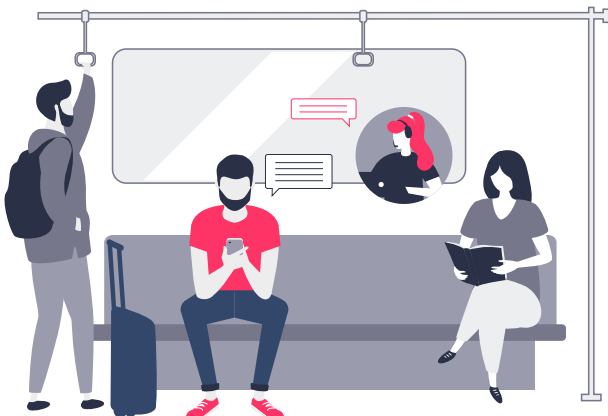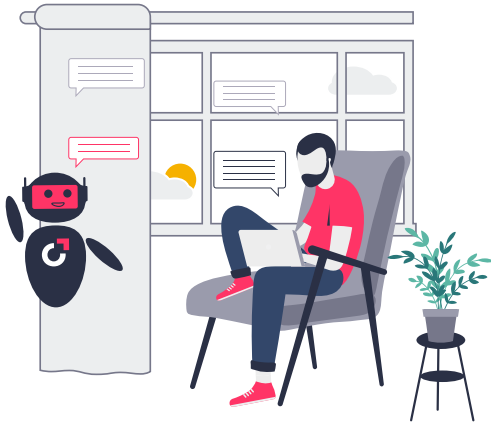
Among the main channels of interaction are:

- Phone calls,
- Text messages,
- Emails,
- Live chats,
- Social networks (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, etc.),
- Messaging applications (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, etc.),
- Customer reviews (Google My Business, etc.).

Breaking free from the channel, while retaining the ability to switch between channels

There are many factors which influence customers when it comes to choosing the best channel to contact a brand's customer service. The biggest three seem to be the following:

- Speed,
- Urgency of the problem,
- Time of day.

Companies that can be contacted via a variety of channels have an edge over those who are only available on a few. However, to be truly omnichannel the company must monitor customers' journeys and, if necessary, reach out and begin a conversation or redirect the customer to the most appropriate channel to handle their request.

Each interaction on a new channel will thus be fueled by previous interactions on other channels and will allow the agent, a true brand ambassador, to save time for greater customer satisfaction.

The Holy Grail for brands is reconciling these different interactions while still being able to:

- Maintain and exceed level of quality on these different channels,
- Meet their customers' expectations, taking into account the different profiles and age groups, each with their own conversation preferences,
- Adopt the same tone of voice, be it via virtual or human ambassador.

#5

A single conversation with brand ambassadors, be they human or virtual

Today, a majority of companies consider conversational agents as a lever for their digital transformation. Integrated on a company's website or via a voice application, they are increasingly used by consumers.

When cleverly integrated into contact points, virtual agents are able to:

- Provide 24-hour availability and answer customers' queries,

- Free up human ambassadors by taking care of simple requests,

- Improve contact center's productivity,

- Increase customers' satisfaction by guaranteeing a cohesive conversation for the entire interaction, no matter how many channels it is on!

Multiple participants, a single voice

Ambassadors, whether they are human or virtual, must use the same voice: the brand's voice. How to turn this pipe dream into reality? **By breaking down silos and making sure the answers don't change depending on who the customer is speaking to**. It doesn't matter whether a human or robot delivers the support!

To enable a seamless customer journey, it is often necessary to rethink the organizational structure of the company and to ensure customer service is at its core. It is paramount to understand that different functions (marketing, customer relations, IT, digital, etc.) do not always work together. Each one needs to contribute to the whole and will, in turn, derive a major benefit in terms of customer satisfaction.

When it comes to relationships with customers, **each and every one of the company's employees must become an ambassador and have access to the same knowledge base, which is enriched by all**.
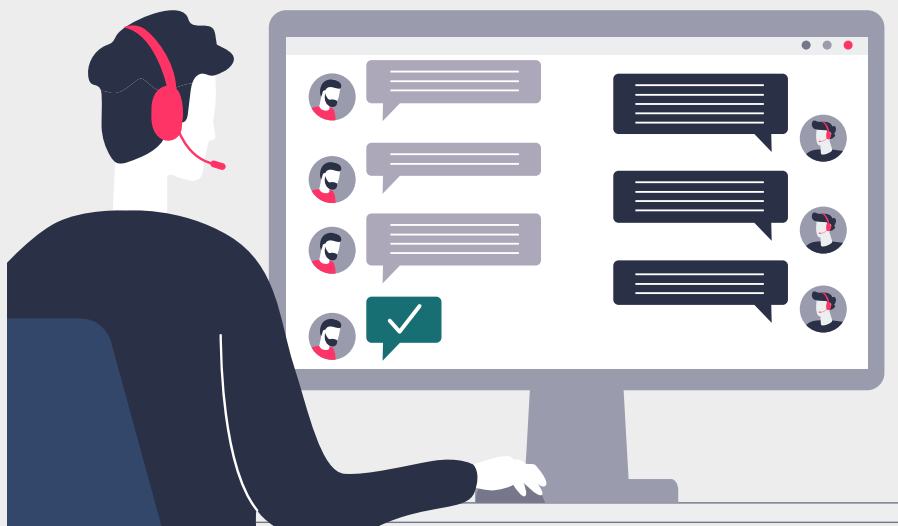
If the agent, virtual or human, has the same toolkit – whether the request is handled by phone, email, or Facebook Messenger – the answers they give to the consumer need to be united and use a single voice: the brand's.

This implies the approach reflects the brand's personality, their values, and is consistent, regardless of who is doing the talking and what the channel is. This means, of course, using the same level of politeness and the same quality of language, but also the same tones, which accurately reflect the brand's identity, while adapting to situations.

It is important to make sure there is consistency and **create the impression that when a customer switches from one channel to another, from one agent to another, they remain in the same universe: the brand's universe!**

This especially applies to digital interfaces, where the UX/UI is used to make the brand highly recognizable. But it is also valid, of course, on voice channels (telephone, IVR, smart speakers), where an agent needs to remain in one soundscape – i.e. the same warmth, rhythm, tones, style, register, sound…

Bots in all their shapes and forms

In 2020, the trend is still here: bots are on the rise within organizations. They are present at all levels and help improve team performance.

According to a 2019 report by the Juniper Research Institute, the use of chatbots – conversational programs present on digital channels, such as websites, instant messaging, mobile applications, etc. – will become more frequent and interactions with them will increase eightfold over the next four years, reaching 22 billion in 2023.

Thanks to **Natural Language Understanding** (NLU) and **Automatic Speech Recognition** (ASR), chatbots are able to match a question with an answer. It can apply a scenario that corresponds to intent recognition or react according to the user's choices (via choice buttons in a carousel, for example).

Thanks to these technologies and their ongoing development, more and more companies are taking the leap and deploying their bots on a voice application: **voicebot**. Its uses are similar to those of a chatbot, but the interaction is done through a vocal command! However, a few

changes are to be expected for brands, because we don't speak like we write. The language, and therefore the brand's voice, must be adapted.

Finally, one last available alternative, this time via the phone channel, is the callbot. This contraction of "call" and "bot" simply refers to a virtual agent capable of automatically and immediately answering questions asked by customers over the phone. The idea is to apply the same logic of the chatbot on an Interactive Voice Server (IVS), thanks to the technologies of **automatic voice recognition (ASR) and voice synthesis**.

Leaving it up to the consumer

Of course, the company must adapt their strategy to the profiles and preferences of their customers when it comes to interacting with virtual or human ambassadors. There is no need to force their hand because depending on the situation, not every customer is willing to converse with a virtual ambassador.

The most important thing is to systematically allow consumers to have a choice while offering more services and greater customization!

Use cases

A customer calls his bank to inquire about a real estate project he has. He starts by asking the bank's chatbot about the real estate loan conditions and obtains the initial information he wants: documents required for a loan application, validation period within the relevant departments, etc.

The consumer has started his customer journey. The chatbot has obtained the answers to the questions: "Who are you?" and "What do you want?". The virtual agent will then locate him and put him in touch with the nearest branch and, potentially, his favorite account manager.

Our client then messages him to request additional information and book an appointment.

A date is set for an appointment. Following this, the request is examined. Over the next few days, the client will be kept informed by means of notifications (text message or IM, depending on their preferences).

All in all, 3 channels have been effectively used to seamlessly process this customer request.

Imagine… tomorrow

You are in your kitchen. While enjoying your Colombian coffee, you're telling your coffee maker how satisfied you are – because your virtual agent is everywhere! It gives you information about where that delicious coffee comes from before suggesting that you place a new order right away.

You're not so lucky with your cereal, which has a… piece of plastic in it! Via voice command, you ask your smart speaker to file a complaint. A few moments later, the brand responds with an apology and a voucher equal to the price of your box of cereal.

So, chances are that you will soon be able to express your grievances to the brand live and the brand will answer. Most of the questions/answers can be handled by virtual ambassador and, if the matter warrants it, can be handed over to a human.

Back to today, you, the consumer, check out the reviews of coffee producers before making a purchase. Following this order, you will receive a promotional email a week later. Yet another marketing solicitation in the mist of all those you have already received…

However, starting today, by reconciling the different information (your customer profile, the history of your previous contacts or your last purchases) available, a brand can be more relevant and create a real intimacy with you. How can this be done? Thanks to a precise algorithm and a specific workflow, a brand can anticipate the day when it will be more appropriate to recommend capsules before you run out of stock and schedule sending you a WhatsApp message while you drink your coffee.

#6

A great conversation is a memorable one

Customizing means expressing the brand's identity. However, it also means providing personalized answers to customers according to their profile, background, etc. in order to create a familiarity with them as the conversation progresses, making it meaningful and memorable.

So, once you have established a sense of familiarity with a client (because you know their preferences, etc.), you will be able to personalize the conversation according to the relationship you have created. This allows the brand to become increasingly friendly over the course of the conversation, much in the same way you would talk to the doctor you have known for the last 30 years.

When it comes to customer relations, the agent, whether human or virtual, learns from the conversation history and contextual elements (customer files with information such as name, location, date of birth, contact times, where and on which channel it is best to contact their customer). This makes it possible to create a customer service experience built around forming a bond with the caller, such as calling them by their first name or recalling the date of the last conversation.

However, **it is up to each brand to decide how much they want to customize the customer relationship so each conversation becomes memorable**.

An outstanding conversation is one you remember because you had an exceptional experience with the brand. The idea is of course to avoid negative experiences (which are memorable for different reasons) and to leave

a positive memory that will help generate loyalty and lead to customers recommending the brand. This can be done through:

- Reduced waiting times coupled with immediate responses,
- Relevant answers provided by the agent, improving first contact resolution rates,
- An attentive, empathetic and enthusiastic agent, making each conversation unique by tailoring their answers thanks to previously acquired knowledge of the client's information and history in dealing with the brand.

Using customer data correctly

How do you make sure you create a lasting impression? One way is to use customer data.

A Zendesk report reveals that the top 25% of companies who use customer data (compared to other similar companies), are companies where **"customer problems are resolved 36% faster and response times are reduced by 79%" and "these same companies also resolve four times as many customer requests"**!

Not only do top-performing companies embrace a channel-less approach as a means of interacting with customers through their preferred channels and use more functionality, but **they also rely on more data and make sense of it through sophisticated analytics**.

This data will be distilled raw to the ambassador or through the assistance of an augmented agent, namely a human agent assisted by a bot.

When bots assist agents

The purpose of an augmented agent is to help human ambassadors have access to relevant information, be more insightful, and make every interaction with the customer memorable thanks to the support received.

In addition to simply talking to the customer, the bot listens to the conversation to assist the brand ambassador, if needed, by suggesting answers and sharing a wide range of information.

Virtual agents provide human agents with messages, wording choices, and control steps (following an intelligent scenario that could be used by a virtual agent to respond to the end-user).
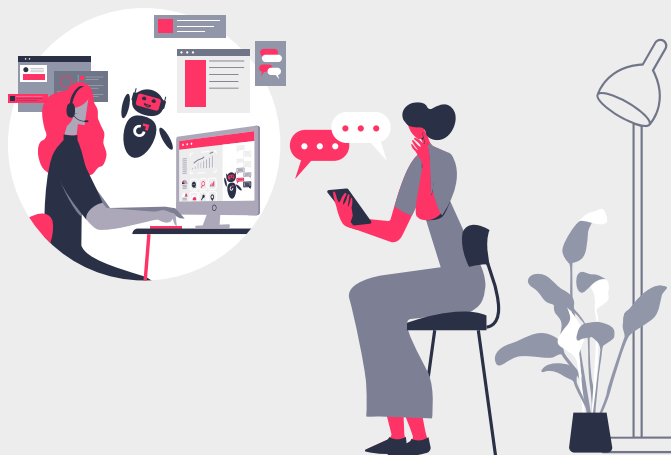
The bot is thus able to:

- Search the history for relevant data to process a request and forward it to the agent,
- Detect emotions and guide the agent – for example, when the tone rises,
- Analyze feelings, semantics, etc. to ensure that the agent does not have to use extra effort to provide the right answers.

However, it is essential to keep in mind a bot's limitations. It is important to have faith that human agents know what needs to be said, so the role of a virtual agent is limited to that of an aide. At the same time, the human agent, who understands the emotions of customers better than a bot ever could, can choose to use the advice given as they see fit.

It should also be noted that the bot will be able to feed information back to the supervisor and let them know if one of their ambassadors is in trouble and needs help.

#7

Conclusion

In 2020, what do customers expect from interactions with brands? As we saw in the introduction, they are used to talking informally with their loved ones on whichever channel is most convenient for them at the time. Likewise, customers are beginning to expect companies to offer the exact same ease of communication.

As well it is likely their favorite channels will vary depending on the time of interaction. Some will prefer email while others the phone, the channel they have always used. Some will prefer to solve their problems themselves using self-service, while many will seek quick, live answers by chatting with a virtual agent.

In addition, just as they find it natural that their friends should adopt new channels of communication, customers expect companies to be able to integrate these channels into their customer service as they emerge as well.

Offering customers the widest possible range of relevant contact channels is no longer just preferable, but mandatory!

Each customer journey is punctuated by times when things can go wrong. In this age of digital transformation, it has never been easier to lose a customer, or their loyalty, sometimes as early as the first online interaction of in initial conversations with your employees.

Technology can only deliver a more consistent customer experience if it is properly used. Stretching the conversation across different channels will only work to the brands' advantage if the data generated at each interaction is leveraged to feed the entire conversation. This is where the notion of history comes in.

Each conversation must be memorable (taking into account the history, previous agents, channels used, etc.) and proceed without having to worry about the channel, while also leaving the client with a positive impression.

Today, brands need to offer their customers more than a simple omnichannel experience. They need to tell a story together, adopting a channel-less approach, as the conversation unfolds!

But to what extent do these transformations impact the ever-changing profile of a typical ambassador? The multiplication of different channels and their integration into a seamless customer journey requires ambassadors to broaden their field of expertise in order to handle both written and oral solicitations, regardless of the channel they come from. In order to do this, it is necessary to equip them with the right tools and to assist them in this transformation. This is a subject we will cover in another white paper.

About the author

Elisabeth De Longeaux is a Product Marketing Manager within the Odigo product team in charge of developing offers for contact centers in the Odigo Suite. Over the past 15 years, she has been involved in, firstly, e commerce, before moving to the field of of digital and information technology and the servicing of key accounts, where she focused on digital transformation and customer service solutions. Her main responsibilities include offer development, product marketing, and managing cross-cutting projects.

Elisabeth's extensive experience contributes to the development of Odigo products, especially in the context of conversational customer relationship.

"Go beyond an omnichannel experience, create a story with your client."

About Odigo

Odigo, a Capgemini brand formerly known as Prosodie-Capgemini, helps large organizations connect with individuals through world-class, cloud-based contact center solutions. Its cutting-edge, proprietary technologies enable a seamless, efficient, omnichannel experience for its customers and a satisfying, engaging experience for service agents.

Odigo serves more than 400,000 agents and business users globally. With a 25-year history of industry firsts, Odigo has more than 200 clients around the world.

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Customer experience
as it was meant to be