Should You Bother With Chatbots?

Hype has been running high for companies to embrace these chatty automatons

TWO YEARS AGO, artificial intelligence upstart AppZen built a smartphone-based personal assistant for employees submitting expenses, hoping to sell it to enterprise customers. "It could understand what employees typed, extract the information it needed, and respond in a conversational way," says co-founder Anant Kale. It was, in other words, a chatbot—a stripped down software program that can talk to customers through text messages, email, or platforms like Facebook or Slack.

While AppZen's chatbot was novel, it wasn't actually solving a real problem. So Kale recalibrated it for a different customer—accounting departments. Now clients Hitachi and InvenSense are using it, but AppZen's work isn't done yet. "Artificial intelligence should never be static," says Kale.

Reminiscent of the apps frenzy that followed the emergence of Apple's App Store in 2008, companies today are racing to figure out if they should develop a bot. Some believe A.I.-infused text-based interactions will dominate brand relationships in the future; others see value simply integrating them into their operations. The technology is tempting: You can customize your bot using free templates (see "If You Build It," below) while automating work otherwise done by employees.

But before you commit, consider whether sinking time and brainpower in a bot will actually add value. "So many businesses suffer from digital FOMO [fear of missing out]," says John Ounpuu, co-founder of digital-strategy shop Modern Craft. "You should invest in the technology only if you're going to get some ROI from it." If you can make the case, here's a road map for building that killer bot.

BUILD A CONVERSATIONAL EXPERT

Virtual personal assistants have long been the holy grail for tech developers, but there's a reason they remain elusive: Creating a bot that can chat as seamlessly about business meetings and bank balances as it can about concert tickets is tough. You could employ a hidden army of humans to help bridge the conversational gap, but, says Dror Oren, co-founder of Kasisto, maker of personal finance chatbot MyKai, companies that want to allocate fewer resources should create conversational guardrails. "When we did a private beta, we saw a lot of people asking the bot about its personal life or who the president was or what their favorite color should be," he says. "We decided to always be polite, but steer people back to our core expertise"—which is banking.

POWER ITS PERSONALITY

Software engineers aren't exactly known for being cocktail party conversationalists. Since they're typically the ones designing a bot's dialogue, Oren hired a writer to develop MyKai's voice and pen its phrases. When Kasisto is recruited by a bank to build its bot, it begins the process by asking about the bank's brand

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If You Build It, They Will Speak

You don't need a massive dev team to build a bot, thanks to an assist from these platforms

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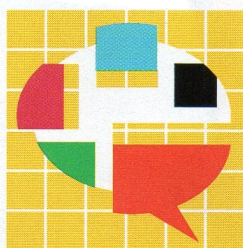
Microsoft's Bot Framework

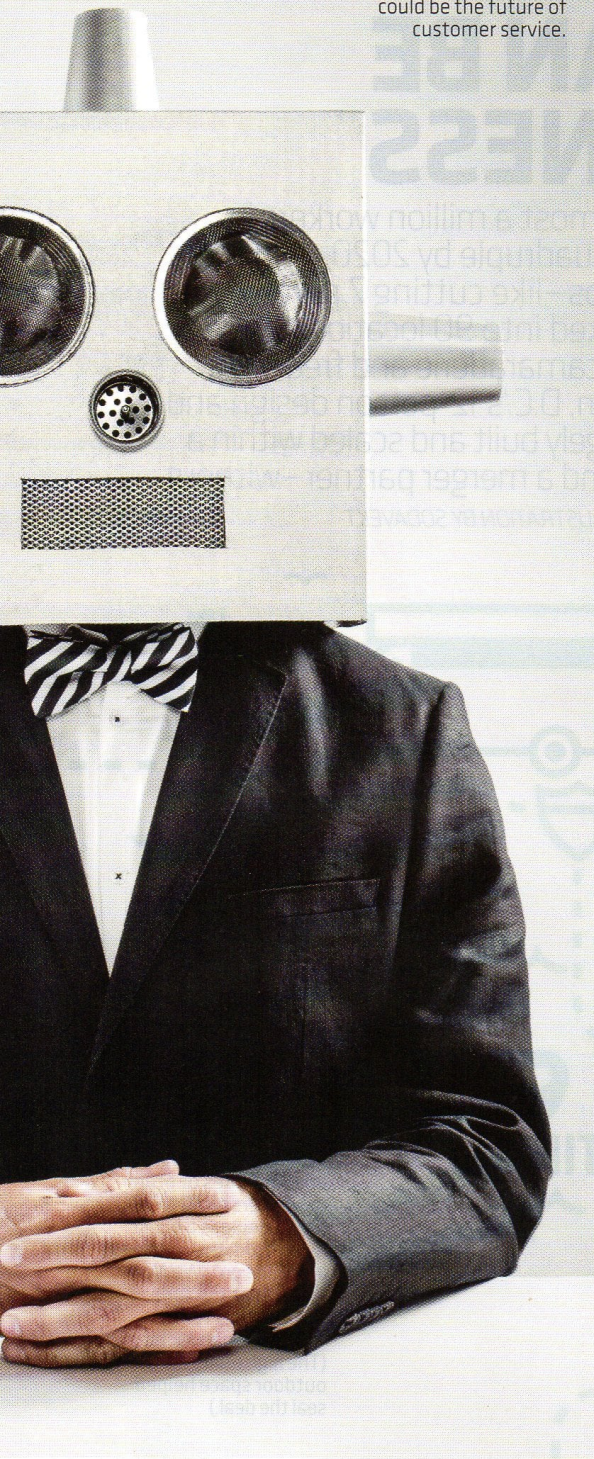These "cognitive micro services" contain API functions that can analyze images and understand conversational language.

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Facebook's Bots for Messenger

This how-to platform launched in April offers message templates and a standard format that's customizable.

personality and target audience, to adjust the bot's language and style accordingly. "Those personas can't be one size fits all," says Oren.

TREAT IT LIKE A LIVING THING

When HP innovation manager David Parry got the green light to build a bot that would let users print photos and documents from Facebook Messenger, he was also given a hard deadline: 3½ weeks. "We had to conceive, design, code, QA, and deploy that quickly," he says. But he encouraged the team to think of deployment as a starting point, not an end goal. "We need to see how customers are interacting with the bot, and then refine using those responses," he says. Within weeks of launch, it was clear that the bot's setup took more back-and-forth than most customers wanted, so his team added the bot to the printer's setup process.

DON'T DISAPPOINT

Soon after 1-800-Flowers launched its bot in April, CEO Chris McCann says his team realized customers didn't mind texting with a non-human, but they wanted the company to be transparent about it. "People are happy to chat with the bot, but we had to make sure they knew what it was at the start." Just as important is a bot that won't short-circuit. Some social media-savvy customers delight in tripping up bots and then embarrassing the company by posting screenshots of the awkward conversation online. Says Modern Craft's Ounpuu: "Showing customers how tech forward you are can be a feather in your cap, but it's also super risky to try to provide something that might frustrate or annoy the customer." –KATE ROCKWOOD

THERE'S A BOT FOR THAT

Creative ways companies are using chatbots to help customers do just about anything
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STAY INFORMED

The CNN News Bot gives a rundown of the day's headlines from inside Facebook Messenger. Readers can request tailored summaries.

KILL OFF HUNGER

Slack users can get Taco Bell menu recommendations and order ahead for pickup with the TacoBot.

GET TO HAPPY HOUR

Uber users can hail a ride from Facebook Messenger by tapping a car icon. Slack users can send a request to Lyft with the command /lyft. The Foursquare bot makes it easy to find a nearby watering hole.

◄ LEARN HOW TO CONTOUR

Sephora's bot on Kik walks users through a quick quiz, before serving up tips and how-to videos on beauty products. Then customers can shop directly for lipstick and other cosmetics through the bot without ever leaving the Messenger platform.
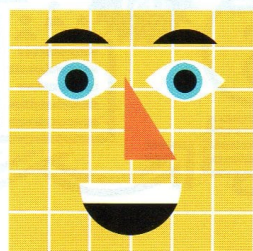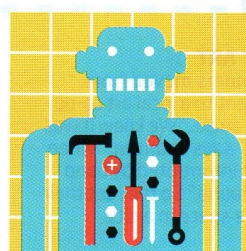

ChatScript

This award-winning open-source framework has a devoted developer community and a reputation for remarkably human interactions.

Pandorabots

More than 250,000 bots have been built on this free platform that provides tutorials. Companies can also pony up to have a custom bot built.

INNOVATE