Whitepaper

Intelligent virtual assistants

Best practices in personalized web self-service
The website: not quite there

A website is an ideal way to attract and engage customers. On paper, all the necessary elements are in place: a wealth of information and tools, 24/7 availability, no wait times and a wide variety of services all on one channel.

But chances are your website isn’t meeting customer expectations. It’s not that the information customers are looking for isn’t there. And it’s not that customers aren’t visiting. In fact, according to Forrester Research 72% of people prefer to go online to find answers to their questions. And, more often than not, the information customers need is on the website—somewhere.

So, what’s the problem? Websites place the burden on users to understand company jargon, learn how to navigate the site and know the “right” steps to get an answer. If visitors can’t find the information they need, they abandon the search and reach out to a live customer-service representative (CSR). According to the Customer Contact Council, 57% of people contacting a call center have already tried looking for the information online. Every time a CSR picks up the phone it costs the company at least $61.

At $6+ per call, companies need a more cost-effective way to efficiently and effectively respond to customer needs, and they are turning to interactive online channels, such as web-chat and intelligent virtual assistants (IVAs), for help. IVAs use natural, or every-day, conversation to guide the user to the exact piece of information they need and can perform many of the same functions as web-chat representatives and CSRs at a fraction of the time and cost.

Bridging the gap

“As the primary interface to our species’ accelerating digital storehouse of knowledge, the Conversational Interface may be the most powerful intelligence amplification technology humanity has experienced to date, and will catalyze a major new punctuation in global social complexity.”

The Conversational Interface: Our Next Great Leap Forward by futurist John M. Smart

Conversation is the most natural way to get information. Enabling machines to use conversation to understand a user’s intent (rather than forcing users to learn a new interface) transforms interactions with a computer into a completely intuitive experience. Major players in the software industry are realizing the importance of this technology—Apple’s investment in Siri, a virtual assistant firm, allows iPhone owners to control their phones by simply speaking a command in their natural, every day language—greatly reducing the time and effort required to complete a task.

Next IT creates intelligent virtual assistants for businesses that deliver the single right answer. They are trained by subject-matter experts to emulate top-performing CSRs—so they know how people ask for information, recognizing what a user is really looking for, even when requests are vague or phrased inaccurately.
Next IT IVAs compare the intent of the question to all of the possible answers, returning the one most relevant answer. And, like a live representative, the IVA takes the burden of finding information off users, making virtual service feel like high-touch, live service.

A company’s website is one of its greatest assets in the sales process. Research shows that simplifying the online experience pays dividends: 94% of customers who experience low effort online report they intend to repurchase, and 88% are likely to increase spending. Simplifying customer question resolution also has a brand-boosting effect—quick query resolution is the top reason consumers will rate a customer experience as excellent.

Being virtual is an advantage

The benefits of adding an IVA to your customer-service toolbox are many, including:

- IVAs can serve thousands of customers at once
- They’re on-the-clock 24/7
- They can work across any channel, in any language
- They navigate users directly to the content they need, providing a personalized self-service experience
- Best of all, they don’t forget training and are always willing to learn more

Next IT IVAs have the ability to scale to meet varying demand. When dealing with the sudden increase in traffic that comes with major events like a product recall, a natural disaster or other unforeseen circumstances, IVAs respond with ease.

Finding the right intelligent virtual assistant

The first step in implementing an IVA is determining if one is right for your company. That can be done by answering a few simple questions:

- How many interactions does your contact center field in a day?
- How many of the questions being asked could be answered with information available on the website?
- How long do customers need to wait before a customer service representative (CSR) responds to their inquiry?
- How long does the average interaction between a customer and a CSR last?
Aligning intelligent virtual assistants to your business strategy

For an IVA to best serve your business goals, it’s important to have a clear understanding of the primary business value to be achieved.

• To **maximize web containment**, implement an IVA in a manner that will address your most common failure points. This may be in the form of proactive help or by simply defining industry jargon in a way the user understands. An analysis of contact-center transcripts can help determine what areas to address first.

• To **increase sales**, take a look at previous customers’ buying patterns to identify a clear path for the development of cross-sell and up-sell opportunities. A Fortune 100 investment firm has yielded significant results by leveraging their offers through a Next IT IVA—making it simple to understand each offer and easier for consumers to ask questions about the offers and act on them.

• To **improve the customer experience**, consider implementing an IVA to make tools and services easier to use or useful in new ways. One Next IT IVA proactively engages users to assist them with a retirement calculator and help them complete enrollment forms, easing interactions and making online services more accessible.

Highly expandable

Next IT IVAs have the ability to recognize user intent with incredible precision across entire enterprise domains, averaging 95% accuracy. Businesses who have implemented Next IT technology realize significant savings, increased conversions and happier customers, prompting them to look for ways to increase the reach of the implementation across multiple consumer touch-points.

‘SGT STAR’, the virtual guide to U.S. Army life on goarmy.com, is the first to have a presence on Facebook, and ‘Spike’, who serves up information for Gonzaga University students and alumni, is the first IVA to answer questions via text message. Next IT IVAs have been integrated into a unified desktop application, guiding users to content and resources within the tool and connecting business professionals with the application that will best serve their needs.

With experience gained over multiple implementations for some of the world’s largest organizations, Next IT is highly-skilled and trained in the business rules and customer-service processes that an IVA must interact with. Plus, Next IT has deeply-developed language models for many major business verticals, eliminating the need to start from scratch.

Big data—a 24/7 focus group

Employing a Next IT IVA is like having a 24/7 focus group at your disposal. When customers are free to use their own language to ask questions, you’ll discover what they really want to know. Next IT administrative tools and reports make it easy to discover where service can be expanded and optimized. These tools also help expose additional customer segments—so businesses can deliver more targeted, relevant marketing and service strategies.
Intelligent virtual assistants: best practices in personalized web self-service

Complementing existing customer-service strategies

Some customer-service scenarios truly require the human touch, and Next IT IVAs help optimize contact-center resources as expert problem solvers. IVAs are able to detect when a user isn’t getting the answer they need and will escalate the conversation to a CSR in a way that bypasses one of the most common complaints of customers—being asked to repeat information (56% of customers report having to re-explain an issue as being a top problem when encountering customer service⁴). Next IT provides the entire conversation history up to the point of escalation to the CSR, quickly getting them up to speed with the customer’s needs.

Making the leap

“By 2015, 50% of online customer search activities will be via a virtual assistant for at least 1,500 large enterprises.” – Gartner⁵

Advances in conversational technology are now helping companies create customer-service strategies that give consumers highly personalized service—without increasing staffing and the investment in training that goes along with it. IVAs reduce call wait times and free up CSRs to respond to more complex queries.

Next IT would like to help you get started by showing you an effective strategy for implementing an intelligent virtual assistant. Visit www.NextIT.com today to learn more.

About Next IT

Founded in 2002, Next IT has been at the forefront of virtual assistant technology for over a decade. Alme, Next IT’s flagship product, is the most trusted virtual assistant platform. Customer experience leaders including Aetna, Alaska Airlines, Amtrak, Charter Communications, Symplmed Pharmaceuticals and the U.S. Army all rely on Alme to provide their customers with remarkable experiences every day.

Visit www.NextIT.com for more information.