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Deloitte WA State Technology Fast 50: Spokane's Next IT Corp. lets websites talk back to the customers

Disruptive technology emulates human behavior

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Deidre Silva](#) Contributing Writer

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Fred Brown, president and CEO of Spokane's Next IT, doesn't think people should be forced to adapt to computers. It should be the other way around.

It was this line of thinking that led him to develop human emulation software, programs that make computers behave more like people.

Next IT Corp.'s "ActiveAgent" programs have human characteristics such as distinctive voices, personalities and avatars, or, computerized visual representations of the program.

The goal is that the human characteristics will make users feel as though they have a personal assistant working on their behalf.

"I want this software to be very conversational so the software is able to clarify and discover the human intent behind the request," Brown

said.

Specifically, Brown saw the human emulation technology as a way to overcome the "search paradigm," where a user looks for an answer to a question by entering a series of keywords into a program. The result is a list of links intended to provide an answer to the search question. While some of the links on the list may be useful, it can be time-consuming to navigate the list of options. Sometimes the list provides meaningless links and new keywords need to be entered.

ActiveAgent was launched by **Alaska Airlines** in January 2008, in the form of the website's "Ask Jenn" feature. Brown said the human emulation is so successful on that site that customers even flirt with Jenn. The U.S. Army has its own helpful avatar named "Sgt. Star."

According to Brown, ActiveAgent can offer a huge economic benefit because it improves the online customer service experience while reducing costs of taking phone calls to answer questions.

"Alaska Air is really focused on its customer service, particularly in this economic climate," Brown said. On the Alaska site, Jenn is asked anything from whether a fishing rod can be carried on the plane to how to fill out a lost bag report.

ActiveAgent is well-suited for companies that deal with customers through a call center or a website. Even if human emulation software isn't loaded on the website, a company's call center employees can still use the software to research answers for clients while they are on the phone. **Merrill Lynch** and **BECU** (formerly **Boeing** Employees' Credit Union) use ActiveAgent in this manner.

Brown attributes his company's success to engaging and developing "disruptive technology," such as changing how computers and people work together.

But convincing potential clients that their customers want to be "disrupted" is another matter. Next IT combats the reluctance to change by organizing focus groups to show prospective clients that customers' primary concern is getting accurate information



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quickly and easily.

"Customers aren't as afraid as company officers may think," Brown said.

That assertion is reflected in Next IT's revenue growth. It increased more than 1,478 percent in the last five years, recording revenue of \$15.7 million in 2007. Brown expects continued success of Next IT's voice product will spur future revenue growth and that his company will need to add to its staff of 145.

"We are barely touching the surface of the market," Brown said, adding that opportunities are foreseeable in mobile devices, information kiosks and for intercompany use.

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