

'BE BOLD AND BE BRAVE'

Generative AI should enhance customer experience, not
depersonalise it, as Atif Rashid tells Rachel Willcox

When in February the customer experience industry heard claims that the use of artificial intelligence (AI) was doing the equivalent work of 700 full-time agents and reducing operating expenses, it certainly sent ripples across the customer service industry.



As AI continues to take the world by storm, these claims have done little to quell fears about the impact on jobs. But Atif Rashid, solutions director at Concentrix, is adamant that using AI as an opportunity to purely slash headcount is a flawed strategy. Instead, advances in generative AI, facilitated by a recent explosion in processing power, are paving the way for customer service capabilities never before deemed possible.

"The sheer number of calculations taking place at any one time is mind-blowing. Whilst the human brain can perform around one simple mathematical calculation per second, an exascale computer can perform at least one quintillion calculations at the same time it takes to say one Mississippi".

In practical terms, the evolution in computing power is allowing the customer service industry to make better use of unstructured data. "I personally think AI is a force for good – it's there to enhance and augment the customer experience."

That said, the starting point to great customer service can't be technology, he warns. "It's how you get the best use out of that capability across the wider landscape." AI is certainly no exception, he says.

Rashid knows what he's talking about. NASDAQ-listed Concentrix is a Fortune 500 company that focuses on helping its clients improve the customer experience, offering consultancy services and a range of technologies to underpin its proposition – including journey design and contact and channel strategy. But with 440,000 people across its global business, the human element remains a vital component of Concentrix' unique selling point.

The insights gleaned from working with 2,000 clients globally across a range of sectors, including some of the world's biggest brands, give Concentrix an unrivalled view of the ins and outs

of customer service. "We're handling billions of transactions every year, across digital, voice, messaging, emails and chat."

The customer service themes that emerge are almost identical regardless of the sector, Rashid says.

"The expectations are broadly the same around speed to resolution, hyper personalisation, enhanced digital interactions, brand loyalty and advocacy. Face-to-face, there's a very different expectation because a lot of sentiment and emotion gets into those types of conversations."

Although AI has been around for decades in the form of voice bots, chatbots and written translation, it's the ability to humanise and soften some of these rather transactional and binary digital interactions that have long been the missing link, Rashid says.

Rather than replace the human aspects of customer service, generative AI offers the potential to augment and enhance the customer experience, allowing for hyper-personalisation underpinned by terabytes of structured and unstructured data, he explains.



"When customers speak to multiple departments and get passed from pillar to post it creates a lot of friction and dissatisfaction, with a potential knock-on impact on brand advocacy and reputation." Gen AI enables a single and personalised view of the customer – regardless of channel – that has been lacking in the past.

"We all work in very different ways," he explains. "Some customers love digital channels, some hate digital channels, some want human, some want

fully self-serve and never want to speak to humans ever again. Tapping into those nuances using AI is going to be a real game changer for us as a business.”

Concerns that AI will remove that human interaction or the customer value that customers really look for are unfounded, Rashid adds. “We are a people-first business. We see AI augmenting and enhancing the customer experience.”

It’s not a silver bullet to fixing all your customer service problems, but it’s a tool to tailor the customer’s journey, and give the customer a level of choice about how they interact with you, rather than be forced down a particular route. AI and chatbots have had mixed reviews. The key will be high quality design thinking that goes into creating a symbiotic Gen AI and humanised experience.

DETECTING NUANCE

“In the past, the only thing you could really detect was the reason why people contact you using a

topic and intent analysis – what’s the intent of the contact, what topic category does it fall under, and how this would differ by channel” he explains.

“We can now pick up sentiment, emotion, certain triggers around friction, frustration, anger – all using AI in real time. It’s picking up tonality, the pace, the speech and when it picks up that the interaction is going in the wrong direction, we can immediately change the way we engage with that conversation.”

Similarly, systems can detect those in an automated channel who want to speak to a human being. “We will quickly hand them to an expert, but the advantage here is we’re not going to ask them to repeat what’s already happened. We already have that level of data available.

“We’re wrapping behavioural science and all the nudge theory that sits behind it and overlaying it with the customer journey, and the contact strategy. In addition, I believe that Gen AI will also



unlock neuro-divergent ways of communicating, which will further fuel the human experience of AI conversation. The foundation is the science, the data, the design, then it's the tech as an enabler," he says.

"Systems designed to reduce cost and speed up interactions without adequately looking at the customer experience are fundamentally missing a trick and risk damaging customer loyalty and brand advocacy."

For the customer service industry too, AI is changing the employee experience, particularly as automation removes much of the grunt work and admin from the job and steps up to the challenge of dealing with simple customer service requests. Rashid admits the knock-on impact in terms of the kind of people and skills that are required is not to be sniffed at.

"The role of customer service will evolve and change without a doubt. And because AI is picking up some of the simple tasks but augmenting the complex tasks, customer service staff at the frontline will need to be generalists with a high skill set," Rashid predicts. "We are seeing this through our recruitment and attraction campaigns and one of the first questions they ask is 'what are you doing in the AI space?'"

But higher-calibre recruits will also demand higher salaries, which in turn is more likely to attract people into a career in this industry. "I think we'll see a marked shift and an evolution that will help to further professionalise the industry," he says.

In reality, adoption of this kind of generative AI is yet to hit the mainstream. "Those in the high-tech space tend to be at the bleeding edge. Others are a bit more risk averse, particularly financial services organisations, who like to see what the disruptors

are doing so they can plan where they need to get to in a year or two years' time. Technology, demographics and businesses are moving at a pace where most of them are trying to play catch up because things are evolving on a monthly, let alone yearly, basis. So having a vision of now plus the next 18 months is the most prudent way to approach this."



At the same time, concerns around digital security are also fuelling nervousness – among both consumers and clients – about just how far to go down the generative AI route. And AI regulation and rules about data usage, transparency and security remain very much a work in progress, further stalling adoption.

Nonetheless, Gen AI has to be on your radar if you're serious about your brand experience, Rashid says. "Technology will be front and centre of all interactions. I would implore organisations to first understand the business and the customer strategy before you do anything else. Listen to your customers but equally be brave and be bold in order to differentiate yourself in the industry and amongst your competitors".

GENERATIVE AI MATTERS...

- Centrix has 440,000 people globally and over 2000 clients across various sectors
- AI and increased processing power pave the way for informed improvements to customer service
- The company handles billions of transactions per year, across multiple channels
- Terrabytes of data, structured and unstructured, go into AI-powered customer service enhancements