

Artificial intelligence is the next revolution in customer service

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As a leader, you (should) care about customer service. After all, if you don't keep your customers happy, not only will they stop paying for your products and services, but in today's highly connected world, they'll tell everyone else about what went wrong.

When you couple that with the reality that consumers generally have higher expectations than even just a decade ago, your most competitive advantage may just be your follow-up and after-sales service to your clients. But exceptional service can be a rapidly moving target.

Customer service has undergone at least two significant revolutions in the past 40 years. In 1981, Roy Weber transformed the realm of customer service with his invention of the 1-800 toll-free number.

Suddenly, people everywhere across the country could pick up the phone and reach someone who could answer their questions and help them trouble-shoot problems. This was a colossal client-focused step forward compared with the old world in which the only reasonable way to reach the manufacturer or service provider was via the post.

The next major upheaval came with the widespread use of e-mail. Ray Tomlinson is credited with implementing the first e-mail program back in 1972, but it wasn't until the early 1990s that its use became truly pervasive. Anyone who had a question about your product or service could now ask any time of the day or night – no need to wait for business hours.

Despite the significance of these innovations, the underlying premise in customer service has always been to fix an issue identified by the buyer. But it is 2018, so it is time to finally change that paradigm.

The next revolution in customer service: to fix the problem before your customer tells you.

The technology to power this transformation exists; it is called artificial intelligence, or AI, and many companies have already harnessed its potential. Envision these three progressive possibilities.

Level 1: Recognize that there is a problem before your customer has to ask. Just fix it, and let them know when it is done! A perfect example is the airline industry. AI can identify when you're going to miss your flight connection, so it automatically rebooks you to the next possible option. A notification informing you of this change is waiting for you when your first flight lands.

Level 2: Realize that a problem may occur and take steps to prevent it from happening in the first place. For example, big-box retailers have inventory data at their fingertips. AI can predict sales patterns and volumes and allow them to reorder before items run out of stock. No more “sold out” situations causing lost revenue or frustrated customers. Some companies have already optimized this ability and they are reaping the benefits of this competitive advantage.

Level 3: Your product or service is designed so well that there is no need for a customer to seek resolution. The instructions are so clear that there is no confusion; the product or service delivery is so perfect that there is no need to complain; the satisfaction is so beyond expectation that there is zero disappointment. This may sound like the unattainable holy grail of exceptional customer service, but with AI, it may not be as farfetched as you might think. Increasingly, AI can evaluate customer behaviour and, therefore, their pain-points. The organizations that are able to crack this conundrum first will be the ones that will pull ahead of the competitive pack.

Levels 1 and 2 of this next customer-service revolution are already happening. The most successful companies have already harnessed the power of AI to deliver these, and they are creating the new norm in customer expectations. And Level 3 is not far off on the horizon.

Yet, there are still companies on the opposite end of the spectrum. You know them – the ones that are making their customers wait hours on the phone for an issue to be resolved, or days for a response to an e-mail query.

So which end of the continuum are you on? If you aren't thinking and acting on the potential of artificial intelligence, you are putting your organization at a competitive disadvantage.

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