

Broadening Customer Access with the latest intelligent Virtual Assistant technologies

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1. Entering the Age of the Virtual Assistant

Every decade it seems that a new computing interaction paradigm emerges. In the 1990s it was the Web, Mobiles set the agenda in the 2000s, while in our current decade we've seen a continued shift towards first generation Assistants such as Alexa and Siri. However, with 2020 looming, we're now experiencing a race to create a single interface for the user – and the Virtual Assistant era is upon us.

With Opus Research forecasting that spending on Enterprise Intelligent Assistants is set to quadruple over the next four years it's clear that - when it comes to deploying today's increasingly smart Virtual Assistant solutions - it's no longer a matter of if but when. In its latest report – 'Decision Makers' Guide to Enterprise Intelligent Assistants', Opus Research projects that the global market for Enterprise Intelligent Assistants is set to grow from around \$1 billion in 2016 to around \$4.5 billion by 2021.

Analyst firm Gartner also predicts that by 2020 customers will be managing 85% of their enterprise interactions without human contact. While only 1% of overall interactions are currently handled by a Virtual Assistant, Gartner estimates that this will grow 10x over the next three years – dramatically increasing the demand for and acceptance of conversational virtual assistants.

And with analysts also now claiming that 50% of all searches will be voice-powered by 2020, enterprises need to be thinking seriously about how they can handle this escalation in multi-channel access if they're not to lose control of the user experience.

Whether its supporting those customers increasingly looking to engage via threaded messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat, deflecting customers to web-based live chat applications, or encouraging engagement via the latest Virtual Assistants, it's clear that organisations are now having to broaden digital front door access to their customer journeys.

2. Key Factors Driving the Shift towards Virtual Assistants

Virtual Assistants and their associated chatbots are playing an increasingly important role in enterprise digital commerce and customer care strategies, particularly for those organisations looking to deliver a more engaging customer experience by taking advantage of innovations in areas such as natural language understanding, machine learning and artificial intelligence.

According to analyst firm Forrester in its recent 'The Top 10 Chatbots for Enterprise Customer Research' report, the three key outcomes targeted by organisations investing in enterprise-grade assistants are: deflecting customers from expensive live support; reducing live agent interaction handling times through successful early-stage self-service; and as a way of extending self-service to channels such as apps, social media and mobile messaging.

A key driver behind this accelerating shift towards Virtual Assistants and enterprise chatbots is a renewed determination by organisations to gain greater control over the volume of contacts looking to engage via their contact centres. Initially it was thought that simply adding an active webchat channel would help in terms of better managing contact centre demand, but many organisations have found that they have simply extended their contact centre volume management challenges on to their webchat platforms.

That's where an integrated Virtual Assistant strategy can help. Customer engagement teams now accept that scaling webchat volumes alone is never going to be the answer. Instead we're seeing smarter organisations increasingly moving towards a more structured multi-channel approach that embraces Virtual Assistants, Webchat and Human-Assisted Contact Centre support as part of a seamless service offering that ranges across both digital and contact centre channels.

Recognising that webchat can typically only generate a 2x efficiency/productivity uplift over traditional voice channels, Sabio's Customer Experience consultants have confirmed that adding a Virtual Assistant capability can help organisations to drive significant scale improvements without adding significantly to their technology costs. A typical enterprise Virtual Assistant deployment, for example, is quickly able to accommodate around 40% and upwards of webchat traffic - releasing significant resources to either improve overall webchat performance or supplement existing contact centre operations. Specific Virtual Assistant business benefits that organisations can target include:

Reduced Operating Costs via:

- Automation of repeat contact reasons
- Increasing digital channel containment
- Deflecting high volume, low complexity calls

Improved Customer Satisfaction via:

- Streamlined interactions and reduced frustration
- More consistent cross-channel experiences
- Simpler self-service, encouraging greater advocacy

Increased Conversions via:

- Enhanced product discoverability
- Ability to resolve questions in real-time
- More proactive cross-selling leading to increased average order sizes

Lower Total Cost of Ownership via:

- Increased re-use of investments across channels
- Proven and easily deliverable ROI
- Access to controls that allow ongoing self-service optimisation



3. Characteristics of Successful Virtual Assistant Deployments

Whether it's too many low-level contacts coming into the contact centre, not enough traction for self-service on the Web, or disconnects between digital and assisted service, there's a growing requirement for Virtual Assistant solutions that can help customers to navigate complex websites, or deflect high-volume, low complexity interactions.

However, any customers and prospects engaging with a brand's Virtual Assistant will – quite rightly – have an expectation that the solution will deliver the right information and assist them in completing their transaction. Because of this, Virtual Assistant solutions need to be simple-to-use, accessible, reliable and designed around the customer's needs.

This can be challenging to get right given the range of skills and technologies that are needed to deliver an effective Virtual Assistant solution. In its latest paper, Opus Research describes how Intelligent Assistant solutions typically span two main areas: Conversational technologies and Intelligent Assistance technologies. Conversational technologies cover speech recognition, text input, avatars, emotion detection and biometric authentication, while Intelligent Assistance technologies embrace natural language processing (NLP) expertise, machine learning and semantic search, as well as conversational analytics and knowledge management expertise.

For analyst firm Forrester, the key differentiators for effective enterprise customer service via chatbots and Virtual Assistants are Natural Language Understanding, Machine Learning and Dialogue Management. Forrester goes on to suggest that: 'no vendor can succeed without a strong intent engine, security and authentication, and multichannel capabilities'.

Opus Research believes that 'companies with existing intelligent assistant solutions in place are ahead of the game, and well positioned to continue leveraging and improving their investments'. However, to make the most of their Virtual Assistant deployments, organisations need to consider the following Virtual Assistant best practice characteristics:

- **Set the correct expectations**

Virtual Assistants have a role to play, but if you promise too much then you can end up frustrating customers. So set achievable expectations and over-deliver

- **Adopt a User Centred approach**

The best products and services are designed around the needs, motivations, emotions and limitations of their users. Virtual assistants are no exception. To ensure success, you will need access to leading technology and the right mix of skills, such as content design, natural language expertise and dialogue design. However, don't neglect your UX and service design people and, most importantly, bring the customer into the process!

- **Make sure that your Virtual Assistant is part of an integrated digital front door strategy**

It's great if your Virtual Assistant solution can handle a large proportion of your interactions, but you also need an escalation path to humans through webchat or voice where necessary. Make sure this is joined up so users don't have to start again when they get to the agent.

- **Use Virtual Assistants to grow your channel reach**

Virtual assistants offer a great way to expand your organisation's contact channels without adding additional human resource. However, whether this is by expanding into mobile apps, Facebook messenger, SMS or Amazon's Alexa, you'll need to make sure you've designed the customer journey and user experience based on actual user preferences

- **Invest in the right content**

'Content is King' and, as such, will require some organisational investment to get right. It also needs to be appropriate to the channel. By their nature, Virtual Assistants are conversational, so your answers also need to be conversational - but without too much content so that you distract users

- **Have the right enterprise IT infrastructure in place**

Effective Virtual Assistants need access to the right IT data sources – such as CRM, service systems, or links to back-end business platforms – in order to automate transactional interactions

- **Focus your Virtual Assistant on areas where it can work well for customers**

Virtual Assistants that help your customers carry out simple service-based interactions (such as checking details, updating addresses, resetting passwords or registering a claim) can deliver impressive results in terms of deflecting demand

- **Understand the constraints of current AI technology**

Artificial Intelligence has come on leaps and bounds over the last five years through access to faster machines, more data and improved algorithms. However, it's not going to build you a virtual assistant on its own. Find a solution that harnesses key elements such as structured machine learning, speech recognition and natural language understanding to build a customer focused solution. Leave the unsupervised learning research projects to Google and Facebook!

- **Adopt an iterative approach to your VA deployments**

Once you've established your Virtual Assistant project by handling a significant volume of first level engagement requests, you can start extending its reach to other transactional areas of the customer journey – however you'll need to keep on optimising your Virtual Assistant for continued success.

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Organisations that adopt a best practice approach to their Virtual Assistant deployments, and who design and operate seamless multi-channel journeys that range across Virtual Assistants, Webchat and Contact Centers, can expect to differentiate through the quality of their digital and self-service engagement. And for those early adopters of Virtual Assistant technology,

4. Virtual Assistant Technology in Action – BGL’s Ask Becky Intelligent Assistant

Whether it’s too many low-level contacts coming into the BGL Group, a leading digital distributor of insurance and household financial services to more than eight million customers, worked with Sabio to design and build an intelligent Virtual Assistant capability for its online customers. Budget Insurance was the first BGL brand to deploy the Virtual Assistant technology, launching its ‘Ask Becky’ intelligent assistant to support online customers of its home, car and van insurance products.

Adding Virtual Assistant technology to its Self Service Centre (SSC) portfolio has allowed BGL to provide customers with 24/7 online support to answer frequently asked questions, easily access policy documents, and update or edit details without needing to call directly. BGL also uses its Sabio Virtual Assistant to provide its agents with additional expert support. Sabio’s solution is based on Nuance’s advanced multi-channel intelligent assistant technology, and has helped BGL to reduce webchat and telephony contact volumes – freeing valuable agent resources to focus on more complex customer queries.

Initial trials have shown that the Ask Becky Virtual Assistant can successfully handle hundreds of different customer queries with 90%+ success rates and, because it features intuitive self-learning technology, BGL is able to fine tune performance, enabling even more customers to self-serve at a time and place that suits them.

BGL chose to work with Sabio because of the complexity of the company’s multi-brand and omnichannel offering, wanting to engage with a supplier that combined both enterprise intelligent assistant capabilities with proven conversational and knowledge management skills to deliver a high quality Virtual Assistant experience.

“Sabio demonstrates its capabilities in both these areas, while also bringing a real understanding of our Customer Excellence strategy goals - having already delivered a number of successful projects for us including Webchat and Speech Analytics capabilities.”

5. Proven Virtual Assistants Expertise and Success with Sabio

Sabio – ranked as a Top Five Solution Provider in the latest Opus Research report into enterprise Intelligent Assistants - provides consultancy, design, development and ongoing optimisation services for a full range of Intelligent Assistant solutions. The company partners with Nuance to deliver solutions based on its Nina multi-channel virtual assistant. Sabio complements

this technology with its own team of specialist conversational technologists and UX experts to create self-service Virtual Assistant solutions that support today’s evolving customer engagement models.

In its Guide to Enterprise Intelligent Assistants, Opus Research highlights Sabio’s ‘broad expertise in customer experience, from customer journey mapping and user experience design to technical deployment and support’ – positioning Sabio as a strong partner for businesses entering the intelligent assistant market. Opus assessed vendors for their capabilities across seven categories, with Sabio receiving a top analyst ranking for Automated Learning, Process Automation, Analytics & Reporting and Multi-Channel engagement.

Having been a leading Nuance partner since 2005, Sabio works closely to combine its own user centered design and specialist natural language and speech recognition capabilities with Nuance technologies to create self-service and Intelligent Assistant solutions that support today’s evolving customer engagement models.

Addressing enterprise requirements for personal assistants integration

The Silicon Valley consumer technology giants have set the pace and expectation for consumers in this area with the release of home personal assistants such as Amazon’s Echo and Google Home. While not yet a key channel for sales and customer service, Sabio recognises these will soon become an important customer touch point.

That’s why we believe there’s a growing requirement for an intermediate ‘conversational middleware’ layer to manage all these interactions, so that organisations don’t need to build out distinct skills or actions for each personal assistant. Getting the right enterprise virtual assistant in place means organisations can treat these as just another channel and manage all their natural language interactions in one place.

This means, enterprises will need to consider multi-channel and ease of data integration alongside core conversational capabilities when they’re building out specific elements such as their Intelligent Assistants strategy. Sabio increasingly supports organisations with the latest ‘conversational middleware’ as a means of handling contact from multiple channels and aggregating disparate data sources.

Broad expertise in supporting Virtual Assistant solutions

Sabio works with customers to recommend where an intelligent assistant deployment will bring most value to their customer contact strategy, whether that be an integration to deflect and triage live chat, assist website interaction, grow channel reach or better manage transitions to human assisted service in the contact centre. Once the precise requirement is identified, Sabio can create best practice solutions from initial proof of concepts through to full production deployment.

Sabio’s broad expertise in customer experience solutions - from customer journey mapping and user experience design through to technical deployment, ongoing support and engagement analytics – makes the company a unique partner for organisations looking to develop and optimise their intelligent assistant strategies.

6. Ongoing Virtual Assistant Optimisation with Sabio

While organisations initially work with Sabio to help reduce their operational contact costs and increase customer satisfaction through the deployment of Virtual Assistant technology solutions, it's also critical that Virtual Agents are continually optimised to both maintain performance and evolve to support changing customer needs.

Sabio combines operational expertise with ongoing optimisation skills to provide its Virtual Assistant customers with a comprehensive mix of post-deployment services, including:

Conversation Reviews

To improve existing content, identify missing content and find additional ways to improve the customer experience and Virtual Assistant understanding.

KPIs and Reporting

Through a range of monthly Virtual Assistant performance scorecards that demonstrate KPIs, trends, engagement commentary and recommendations. Sabio customers also benefit from the company's deep experience and best practice from managing Virtual Assistants across multiple market sectors.

Training and Consulting

With Training on using the Nuance Nina skillset, the IQ studio for content management as well as NES for grammar management. Sabio also provides ongoing consulting on best practices for conversational content writing, user interface design and customer experience optimisation.

Content and Grammar Management

Sabio also offers continued support around adding, modifying and deleting articles and decision trees, as well as support for the fine-tuning of Natural Language Understanding.



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