

How AA Ireland smoothed the road to more sales with bots

Bots are a win-win-win for customers, sales and staff, insists customer lifecycle manager Louise McCormack



Louise McCormack is in charge of rolling out sales and service bots at AA Ireland

“Most bots are customer service-focused, they’re not really sales-focused in general,” she explained. “Sales is actually a pretty unique use case, to be honest. There’s not a lot of bots that are trying to finish a sale online.”

However, sales conversions were where AA’s need was greatest. A pressing problem for the roadside rescue and insurer was turning people who seek a quote on the app or website into insurance customers. Leads are expensive, and people who actively request a quote are among the hottest prospects of them all. Even a small increase in conversion rates could make a big difference, and maybe automation could help.

So that’s where McCormack, whose background is digital marketing, started on the bot journey: designing a chatbot that could make personalised recommendations on insurance cover and price and then smooth the road to a sale.

To prepare the ground for the quote bot she first analysed hundreds of emails and chat logs to find out exactly what people were looking for, when they were using the web forms, and what sort of questions they were asking. This information was used in the design of the bot's flow logic, giving some intelligence to the responses.

Test drive

Once a prototype had been rolled out, McCormack had to ensure that the quote bot would be a force for good, earnings-wise. "The business is always 'digital first', but that couldn't come at the cost of sacrificing sales," she said.

There was a possibility, for example, that the quote bot would burn through those precious sales leads without adding to the bottom line; it could even subtract from it. It might cannibalise existing sales processes, or perhaps people would be put off phoning after having interacted with the bot. None of these things could be allowed to happen. So, the planned eight-week rollout was extended by four weeks allowing time to analyse thoroughly all of the repercussions before the full launch in October 2018.

"By the end of the 12 weeks we had the proof," said McCormack, triumphantly. "We got help from the internal data analytics team and we went through every single person who ever saw the bot, every single quote and we looked at the conversion rate probabilities, everything, on every medium. And what we found is that we were just talking to people who wouldn't have potentially answered their phones, who wouldn't have called us. So, we ended up getting to speak to more people and that's why we got more sales."

Indeed, tests have shown an 11 per cent increase in conversion on quotes generated during out of office hours. In addition, there were fewer missed live chats, and where customers had already interacted with the bot before using webchat, agent-assisted chat times decreased from an average of 16.5 minutes to 10.

The quote bot is linked to the Zendesk webchat software via an API, meaning that sales staff can quickly jump in to assist when required.

"It means that they can get through more chats and they can make more sales. They get someone who's already talked to the bot, they've already gone through the steps to get the quote, so then they can just come in and offer a little incentive to finish it really quickly," McCormack said.

AA Ireland chose US-Irish vendor ServisBOT, in part because of its local presence. The internal IT team had little involvement once the initial fields had been selected, with ServisBOT staff on hand to help McCormack and two colleagues in designing the bot. The rapid rollout was made possible by the platform's modular architecture, which also enables non-coders and business departments to build their own bots, she explained.

"We can just basically design something original, and really quickly because it's in unit building blocks."

The road to an end-to-end bot-driven service

Following the successful launch of the quote bot, work began on a customer services bot to answer FAQs on insurance renewal and policy changes and thus to ease the load on the call centre and web teams. This bot is still in its infancy, but McCormack has big plans for it when it grows up. Ultimately, customers should be able to make policy changes such as adding a new driver seamlessly via the bot, but for now, the barrier is the existing systems, meaning that the final sign off needs to be performed by a human agent.

“The problem is the insurance application we use to generate quotes and access customer information and make changes to policy, it doesn’t have an API. But there’s one on the way in Q1 [2020] and then it will be an end-to-end service started and finished by bot.”

Lots of bots

There are plans for lots more bots too, such as an onboarding bot for new customers, a full sales bot and a policy bot.

The bots are delivered as minimum viable products (MVPs) and are constantly being updated and enhanced. Besides relieving workers of repetitive tasks, they are also very useful for optimisations such as A/B testing, with one set of customers being provided with a slightly different version of the bot. In a call centre scenario, it can be very difficult to gauge the effectiveness of one agent’s script over another, but with two versions of the same bot, controlling extraneous factors is much more straightforward.

“ **The bigger the bots get the bigger business the customer service team will get**”

“If we change the script on the bots, we can tell definitively, with statistically significant results, which is better. Then we can feed that back to the contact centre and say, ‘you know what guys did this line worked really well on the bots, see if that will work for you’.

So, have the contact centre staff been worried their livelihoods might be at risk from the army of tireless bots? So far, while there have been some changes, it’s been a win-win. McCormack insists.

“Some of the guys who were on the phone have moved to the new customer service webchat team, and that team will only grow. The more people that are using the bots, the more times somebody’s going to need to talk to the human. So the bigger the bots get the bigger business the customer service team for webchat will have to get.”