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NEWS

We stopped the conversation for two decades: AI is bringing it back

By Marie Johnson
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The first two decades of the "online century" were about forcing interactions with customers into forms and websites – the silent and rigid channels – because we believed we couldn't afford conversations. We didn't really want people to come into offices and we didn't really want people to call up.

We believed we couldn't afford it. We now know that we can't run a business or government or interact with the community without conversations.

We stopped the conversation. Or at least we tried to.

Citizen-centric or customer-centric in the first two decades of the century was redefined; 'go online' was the mantra, it will be faster, cheaper, easier.

Every organisation large and small, including governments and individuals, raced to stake out their place on the Internet – linking documents, linking information, a place to showcase their brand, sell products, tell the citizen or the customer what government or the brand was doing for them.

Remember the catch cry from 'inline to online?' But the reality became 'inline' to 'online to 'on hold'.

And so it began.

The silent nightmare

As big economic players, the direction by governments in the year 2000 to go online translated into "put all high-volume transactions online."

Organisations flung open their doors and put everything online, like hanging the washing out on the front porch. Uncurated. No transformation. The complexity was pushed out onto the citizen.

Websites unleashed an unimagined nightmare of complexity onto the citizen – great lists of forms, even lists of apps, lots of information nested in a hierarchy of web pages, beautifully bureaucratically and legally written but not easily found or even understood.

The forms industry boomed. To get a sense of the forms nightmare that lurks today, just search any government website for "forms."

With the proliferation of websites came the strategic response – portals, the mega websites that would consume and link to all other websites. A structured response to a structured nightmare.

Everything vacuumed into the portal and a labyrinth of feeding websites A hierarchy of everything where people would be able to find things.

Not so, according to Glenn Archer, former Australian Government CIO, who said that expectations for usage of 'one stop shop' portals have not been met.

This is the structured era, a world of data, forms, formats, websites, apps and mega portals.

And what about the lost souls stuck in this maze? We have all been there.

The structured era has imbedded horrific cost and complexity. Web teams in organisations across the globe groaning under the load while on the outside, citizens and customers face unfathomable confusion and complexity. The structured web era drove unimagined cost across entire organisations and communities.

And at the same time, call volumes exploded to unsustainable levels. Across all industries.

Customers wanted to talk to someone - they were confronted by the complexity and wanted a conversation with someone who listened and understood.

And the response from organisations was again to shut down the conversations: IVR; voice response; on hold; call back; busy tones; business hours; outsource.

This response damaged reputations of organisations and many organisations began to lose control of their brand.

After all, what is a brand – but a promise of an experience?

The structured era created barriers for most people – the website/forms/call centre paradigm significantly impacts and disadvantages people with different needs and abilities. And this impacts us all as we age.

Governments and many other organisations send letters and forms to people who physically cannot open them; to people who cannot comprehend the bureaucratic language; letters, forms and brochures pointing to complex websites and over-burdened call centres. A self-feeding maze of complexity.

For the past two decades, the web world and service delivery paradigms were defined by structure, rigid rules and complexity that institutionalised barriers.

And the greatest cost has been the human experience.

And the reason why this matters is that the human experience and the desire to seek understanding, drives costs, impacts brands and compromises outcomes.

Everything had to adapt, including people.

People, regardless of their abilities, had to adapt to this structured world of nested complexity.

Why on earth would we ever assume that this paradigm would or even should continue?

These rigid interfaces, lacking empathy and where conversations did not exist, were not a human experience.

And while organisations trapped in this web nightmare appear unable to change – or not seeing the need to change - the fundamentals of computing and the very nature of the Internet is rapidly changing.

The emergence and convergence of artificial intelligence, neural networks, adaptive interfaces and natural language will forever change the way people and the systems of society interact and interface.

Co-design to achieve empathetic conversations

Forever, humans have sought understanding in their context through conversations.

What is different for the decades ahead, is that the rapidly advancing ecosystem of AI and co-design innovations, enables the human desire and search for understanding to become contextual through conversations.

This is not about chat-bots which in my view are the latest version of Clippy.

Through co-design, the embodiment of systems as digital humans achieves natural empathetic interactions.

The conversational empathetic layer replaces, or overlays, websites, call centres, forms and the rest.

The new interface is the expressive empathetic human face. We saw this achieved with 'Nadia.'

The starting point and the focus was the human experience of people with disability – including people with intellectual disability – interacting with systems.

The human experience had to embody how people feel, their anxieties and apprehension, who they trust, and to simplify and make natural everyday interactions that are typically and unnecessarily bureaucratically complex and rigid.

Nadia's brain is the context of all the questions people will ask. Nadia's language is their language using ordinary words. An interaction model which brings the language into a natural conversational dialogue.

Nadia's gestures, head and facial movements and mannerisms have all been co-designed with people with disability and supported by university psychologists.

Nadia's voice had to be warm, forward leaning and easily understood. Nadia's personality was co-designed to be friendly, warm and informative. Layers of creative innovation and context.

The digital human face is the new interface – brought to life by a virtual neural network orchestrating all the elements of co-design to achieve a uniquely natural interaction.

A human conversational experience created by co-design, achieves deep domain context and knowledge not possible with chatbots fed simple questions and answers.

The co-designed empathetic digital human has dissolved the uncanny valley because the starting point and focus has uniquely been the human experience.

This innovation is now being applied in commercial settings elsewhere, by brands seeking to differentiate and innovate their customer service experience. Check out Air New Zealand's new digital human employee "Sophie."

And around the world, thought leaders and researchers are contemplating how digital humans and empathetic conversations can be part of breakthrough innovations in different sectors.

There are a few fascinating examples which include an MIT Technology Review; LinkedIn Influencer, Lucien Engelen; interest from Singularity University and contemplated by Dame Hazel Genn for application to reshaping access to justice and legal aid.

The conversation economy

The past 20 years has been about avoiding the conversation and the human experience, because it was believed that conversations were unaffordable.

The next 20 years is exactly the opposite. The conversation economy will explode across the globe in all sectors – from the enterprise through to the consumer.

People and digital humans interacting and connecting through natural empathetic conversations in any language, context, signing or even brain activity input.

We will see digital humans engaged in conversational service and conversation commerce. Digital humans in healthcare; in education; as trainers; in access to legal aid; and in creative commercial enterprises to name but a few.

Regardless of abilities, the conversation economy starts to level the playing field.

The conversation, far from being unaffordable, unlocks boundless human potential and enormous social and economic value.

It is this emotional connection supported by artificial intelligence that I believe will elevate our mobile and other devices from tools to companions.

And people are already saying, "I want my own Nadia, my own digital human."

Marie Johnson is recognised internationally as an entrepreneurial leader in technology and digital innovation. Marie has led the strategy and implementation of very significant reform programs to the digital machinery of government across service delivery, revenue, identity, payments, authentication and whole-of-government architecture. She is an AllIA Board Director; and former Head of the Technology Authority for the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) responsible for "Nadia".

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