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Customer experience in 2021: how does AI factor in?

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As part of our Future Forward webinar series, Best Buy Health's President Deborah DiSanzo joined our CTO Joe Petro for a discussion about customer experience, AI, and how the two are converging in 2021. You can catch up with the webinar, moderated by Dan Miller, founder and lead analyst of Opus Research, on demand, but here are some of the main highlights to get you started.

"Now more than ever" is a phrase you'll hear often when organizations and experts discuss the importance of things like customer experience, connected service, and seamless digital interactions. But the past year has made it very clear that digital experiences are now much more important for serving customers effectively.

Our recent *Future Forward: CX and AI Predictions, Opportunities, and Strategies for 2021 and Beyond* roundtable was led by Opus founder and lead analyst Dan Miller, and focused on this pressing customer experience need—and how AI factors in. We had a great conversation about the near future of AI for CX with Deborah DiSanzo, president of Best Buy Health, and our own CTO, Joe Petro.

Joe had the perfect metaphor to describe what's happening for so many organizations right now: "the digital front door of businesses [has] really lit up, because in many cases the physical front door was shut." With stores, bank branches, and offices closed, and limited access to services like healthcare, customers have flooded to digital channels to contact businesses and providers.

And that means fast, simple digital customer experiences should be at the forefront of this year's business

priorities.

Conversations around CX are getting more complex

As Joe explained, a lot of organizations simply weren't set up to handle the influx of digital interactions that global lockdowns created. Even those that were well on their way to digital transformation in their contact center and self-service channels found themselves struggling with the pace.

One of the main challenges lay in the multitude of channels. In the past, organizations could get away with focusing on improving one channel at a time—their phone helpline or live chat, for example. But in the past year, customers have needed to be able to move freely between channels without the system or human agents losing vital context.

As interactions were pushed behind screens, Joe said, customers simply didn't have the time or patience to work through a bad service experience.

Dan also noted that customer conversations with CX solution providers have rapidly shifted from basic questions like, "How well does it understand intent?" to inquiries about how to connect a complex ecosystem of digital channels. It's not enough for an individual customer service channel to be excellent—CX must be consistently excellent across the board.

Effective AI supports agents—it doesn't replace them

So how does AI factor in? Deborah said she's seen a shift in the world of business AI adoption. Organizations often used to get caught up in the excitement of rolling out shiny new chatbots—but now they're much more focused on identifying a concrete business problem and applying AI in a meaningful way. The question isn't just, "What can we implement?", it's, "What can we solve?"

"As human beings, we always want to have a conversation," said Joe. We all have a built-in inclination to talk, using our own natural language. These days, AI can serve some of that need, which is especially important in an environment of multiple channels, where it's simply not affordable or feasible to put human agents on each one.

And although AI can automate some tasks for humans, that doesn't mean customers are only ever going to talk to an algorithm. Keeping humans in the loop is a theme Joe was really keen to highlight in the discussion—people are so important for handling complex queries, and AI is just there to make that task easier.

AI is easy. Great AI is a challenge.

Good AI is really hard to achieve. One of the big recommendations from both Deborah and Joe was to make sure you don't underestimate the challenge of implementing AI in a way that makes a real difference for your agents and customers. It's no good just ticking off a box on a digital transformation checklist.

Their advice for 2021 focused on the practicalities of AI. For Deborah, the number one concern should be understanding where your data is, what shape it's in, and how you can get it ready to feed into machine learning models for the best results.

On Joe's side, it was all about maintaining focus on today's challenges, with one eye on the horizon. Rather than get distracted about what you *could* do with AI in the future, think specifically about the outcomes you can achieve right now—and tie them directly to a customer experience requirement.

With all the great insights from Deborah and Joe—plus more input from Dan and the audience—there's only so much we can cover in a recap.

So, you can watch the full roundtable for yourself with our on-demand recording, where you'll hear our panelists chat about:

- Why a comprehensive store of clean, categorized data is the best place to start
- The rising tide of fraud attempts—and how voice and behavioral biometrics solutions are working to combat it
- Real-world examples of AI and other CX technologies in action in healthcare, telecoms, and more

Tags: Customer experience, Predictions

About Tony Lorentzen

Tony has more than 25 years of experience in the technology sector, spending the last 17 with Nuance where he is currently the SVP of Intelligent Engagement Solutions within the Enterprise Division. Before that he served as the leader of several teams at Nuance including Sales Engineering, Business Consulting, and Product Management. A proven leader in working with the cross-functional teams, Tony blends his in-depth knowledge of business management, technology and vertical domain expertise to bring Nuance's solutions to the Enterprise market, partnering with customers to ensure implementations drive true ROI. Prior to Nuance, Tony spent time at Lucent and Verizon where he led teams that applied the latest technologies to solve complex business issues for large enterprises. Tony received a B.S. from Villanova University and a MBA from Dowling College.

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