

Customer engagement, Financial services AI

Meet Ceba, Commonwealth Bank of Australia's intelligent virtual assistant

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As one of Australia's biggest banks, Commonwealth Bank of Australia serves more than 17 million customers across its multinational operations. To serve its digital-savvy customers more effectively, the bank partnered with Nuance to build an intelligent virtual assistant. Ceba, the bank's award-winning virtual assistant, has handled more than 15.5 million interactions since its launch in 2018, handling everything from card activation to loan payment deferrals. Over 60% of incoming contacts are now handled end-to-end within the assistant, freeing up live agents to work on more complex cases.

Editor's note: This blog has been updated to reflect CBA's award win at the 2023 Stevie® Awards.

When one of Commonwealth Bank of Australia's (CBA) 7.4 million digitally active customers open a chat window on the bank's app or website, they're greeted by Ceba, an intelligent virtual assistant.

Ceba first came to life in 2018 as a simpler way for CBA's customers to complete basic tasks like activating cards, checking account balances, making payments, or getting cardless cash. But over the past four years, it's evolved to become an award-winning, highly versatile customer service tool that handles more than half a million calls every month. And just recently, Ceba was crowned as a Gold Winner at the APAC Stevie® Awards for the second time.

A sector-wide first

CBA is focused on servicing its customers in the channels they want to use to interact with the bank—so digital is very important. The bank wanted to take the opportunity to find a virtual assistant that could provide services that would traditionally require having to walk into a branch or call into a contact centre.

The tricky part was finding the right way to build a digital support channel that offered the contextual, personalised experience CBA's customers needed. With so many under-optimised chatbots and virtual assistants in the market, customers often worry that the service will be generic or unhelpful. CBA wanted to exceed its customers' expectations and provide a tailored experience—and Nuance's virtual assistant tools aligned well with its strategy.

The virtual assistant, which CBA built using our [omnichannel digital engagement tools](#), was one of the first in the Australian market. After five months of development, CBA rolled out its first iteration of Ceba, which had the ability to verify customers' identities and service basic banking requests. By focusing on authentication as Ceba's first functionality, CBA could ensure all the responses the virtual assistant gave were relevant and personalised. But the work didn't stop there.

With a mindset of continuous work and improvement, Ceba has become a hugely knowledgeable first point of contact for CBA's customers. Ceba can now recognise more than 500 different types of enquiries and around 70,000 questions, which means it can handle up to 97% of contacts without customers needing to wait for a live agent to become available. And unlike human agents, Ceba can answer hundreds of customers simultaneously, in seconds—which means customers with easy queries can get what they need more quickly.

Millions of requests—all handled digitally

Ceba now fields an average of 550,000 queries every month, on a huge variety of topics. But the service was really put to the test during the height of the COVID-19 disruption.

The assistant experienced huge peaks during this time. Its biggest month so far was August 2021, with Ceba handling 606,000 conversations, around 500,000 of which were about deferring loan repayments. The bank has been suspending home loan payments for customers that are experiencing hardship, which led to an 800% increase in calls to our contact centre—more than it could handle. But with Ceba, CBA could redirect many of its customers to the website for the same high standard of service, faster.

Powered by Nuance's [machine learning and conversational AI capabilities](#), CBA trained Ceba to recognise, decipher, and answer five COVID-specific enquiry types—all of which were built and deployed in less than a week.

Customers looking for CBA's loan relief programme can ask Ceba to guide them through the process online—not only did introducing this deflect a high volume of traffic from CBA's contact centre, but it also gave the bank's customers fast, compassionate support during a difficult period. Now, Ceba sees around 4,000 COVID-specific enquiries a month.

Seamless escalation for complex cases

With so many different topics now covered by Ceba's knowledgebase, the majority of CBA's customers can do everything they need within [the virtual assistant](#). Around 60% of enquiries are handled end-to-end by Ceba—which means in these cases, the customer never needs to talk to a human agent.

But there are always more complex cases that need a human touch, and it's not unusual for some customers to prefer talking to a person. That's why Ceba also has the ability to seamlessly escalate conversations to CBA's contact centre with the whole previous interaction intact, so agents know exactly what customers are looking for without them having to repeat themselves.

The roadmap to recognition and evolution

Over four years of development, Ceba has become a market leader in Australia's financial services sector. CBA was awarded Gold in the Innovative Use of Technology in Customer Service (Financial Services Industries) category of the 2021, 2022 and 2023 APAC Stevie® Awards, in recognition of its game-changing virtual assistant deployment.

But the work doesn't stop here, either. After more than 15.5 million interactions so far, CBA plans to continue evolving Ceba in line with its customers' and employees' changing requirements, adding new functionality, and using Nuance's built-in machine learning techniques to refine it.

CBA is also looking at how to use the virtual assistant for its own staff. With thousands of employees

servicing customers every single day, searching for information to answer queries, the bank is exploring the best way to provide that same level of technology that it provides for its customers by adding internal support capabilities to Ceba.

Tags: [Financial services](#), [Intelligent virtual assistant](#)

More Information

Explore virtual assistants

Discover how you can build intelligent, customer-friendly virtual assistants that can help your organisation deliver faster, more responsive customer service.

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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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