

What’s next



Enterprise

Oh! I know! I know! – Proactive voice interfaces: Part III of “What’s left to tackle in voice technology”

Get ready to make friends with the kid who always has the answer. The next thing we're going to see in smart speakers is proactive engagement in conversations. Alexa, Google Home, and all the variants will have an option for them to be proactive and helpful in conversations. Ken Arakelian paints a picture of how that will look.

Ken Arakelian

Posted March 2, 2018



Everyone knows that kid in class that knew everything. Constantly raising their hand when the teacher asked a question, silently insisting, “I know! I know the answer! Call on me!” If you don’t know this kid – maybe you were this kid. Well, here he is again, in your adult life. The smart speaker.

The next thing we’re going to see in smart speakers is proactive engagement in conversations. Alexa, Google Home, and all the variants will have an option for them to be proactive and helpful in conversations. They’ll start listening to what people are talking about and get involved in the conversation when it makes sense. Imagine a typical Saturday morning conversation in the kitchen:

Mom: What time is your lacrosse practice today, Ted?

Ted: Uhhh, I don t know It s going to rain all day so it ll probably be cancelled.

Alexa: Ted s practice is on Google calendar at 1pm today at East Field. The forecast does show heavy rain and thunderstorm around 12:30pm.

Mom: Thanks, Alexa.

Alexa: No problem.

This is an example of a smart speaker being helpful when it jumps into a conversation. Smart speakers will use affirmations like “Thanks, Alexa” to decide whether it’s interrupting too much or if it should offer more info.

“The Clippy Balance – A Cautionary Tale”

Clippy was the user interface agent that came bundled with Microsoft Office starting in 1997. It remains, arguably, the best known and most hated user interface agent in computer history. It would pop up and try to predict what you wanted to do and most of the time miss the mark. When our smart speakers become proactive and start conversations or interject themselves into our conversations they’re going to have to strike a balance – Let’s call it “The Clippy Balance”. Smart Speakers will need to listen for affirmations that they’re being helpful and also listen for the negative feedback from users like “Shut up Alexa!

Read more in this series:

- [Part 1 – Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo: Part 1 of What’s left to tackle in voice technology](#)
- [Part 2 – Over and Out – Moving beyond the walkie-talkie voice interface: Part II of “What’s left to tackle in voice technology”](#)

Tags: [human-machine interaction](#), [natural language understanding](#), [proactive engagement](#), [virtual assistants](#)



About Ken Arakelian

Ken Arakelian is the director of product management for Nuance's On Demand business. With more than 15 years of experience, Ken has worked in the contact center industry as a consultant, account manager and product manager.

[View all posts by Ken Arakelian](#)