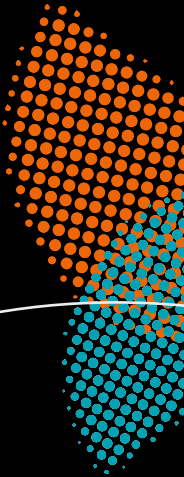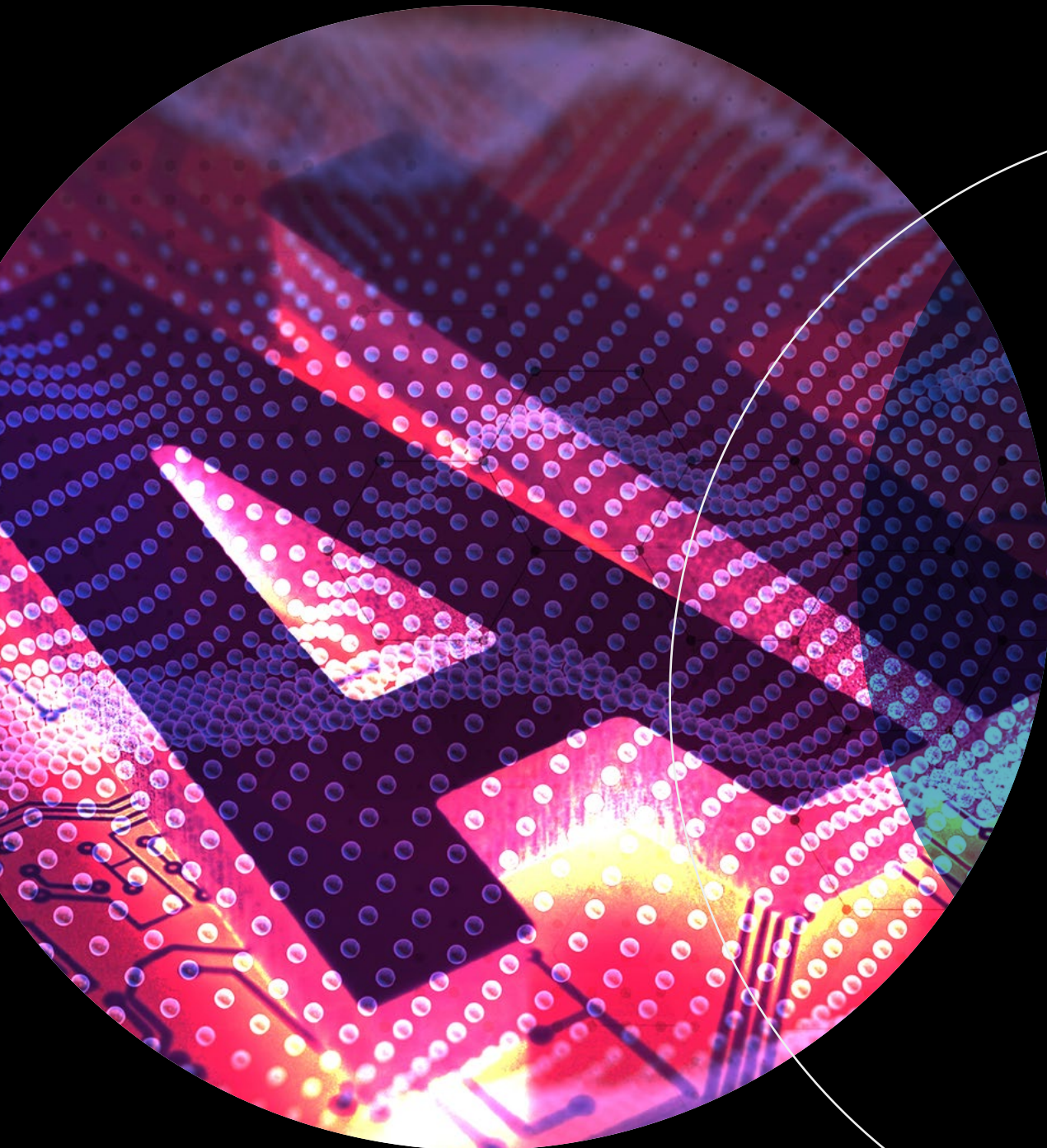B2B Marketing

Insight · Development · Training · Events

AI in B2B:
Going beyond the hype

Real-life case studies showing how artificial
intelligence is transforming B2B

Why there's nothing to fear, and everything to gain, from AI

Joel Harrison
Editor-in-chief
B2B Marketing

The level of hype, expectation and sometimes outright dread associated with the development of artificial intelligence is unprecedented in the nascent world of marketing technology.

Our opinions are often formed (or at least subliminally influenced) by dystopian or apocalyptic Hollywood visions of robots taking over the planet and enslaving or eradicating human beings. By contrast, predictions of wholesale employment obsolescence as AI gradually takes over various job functions, making humans superfluous, create worries on an altogether more relatable human level. Neither do much to endear us to AI. It's fair to say that, at least in part, AI has something of an image problem.

What's worse, the real, tangible and practical benefits of AI in a B2B marketing capacity are stubbornly obscure. Sure, there's lots of talk about AI's potential to transform B2B, and enable better, faster, stronger results, but besides the often unsubstantiated claims of bandwagon jumping vendors, actual evidence of this remains fragmented at best, outright elusive at worse. As a result, the hype (both negative and positive) is overshadowing reality. It's hard for B2B marketers to answer the simple questions: 'Just what can AI do for me? And what can and should I be doing about it?'

This report is designed to change that. It's built around a series of five inspiring case studies which demonstrate how AI is making a real, practical, tangible and above all valuable impact on B2B marketers' lives, in everyday marketing situations that we can all relate to.

Perhaps more importantly, it will bypass the hype and show how the rise of AI is not a cataclysmic, earth-shattering, revolutionary event, but a gradual switch over or re-deployment of responsibilities, enabling marketers to do their jobs better. And it will provide them with the confidence to seek out AI-enabled systems to improve their own marketing.

And all that without a terrifying, unstoppable indestructible robot assassin in sight!

AI: Powering a new era for data

Deepak Agarwal
VP Artificial Intelligence,
LinkedIn

"At LinkedIn, AI is like oxygen. We've been using it for over a decade to create the member experiences that people value most on our platform. It adds structure to the rich and valuable data that we have – and crucially, it helps to keep our site safe. We're entering a hugely exciting era for businesses of all types. Customers will increasingly expect the types of experiences that machine learning helps to deliver: more intuitive, more valuable and more secure. The good news is, the machine learning technology to enable those experiences is now more accessible than ever.

In our experience, machine learning can deliver the greatest value when you can clearly define an objective that you are trying to optimise around – and you can design a mechanism to collect data at scale that gives you valuable information around that objective. The stories in this report are particularly inspiring in the way that they show businesses leveraging the AI applications now available to marketers, through strategic clarity and innovative thinking about the data they can bring to bear."

Contents

Vijay Chittoor, co-founder and CEO, Blueshift, and AI trailblazer

Founded in San Francisco in 2014, Blueshift has been at the forefront of the AI revolution, pushing at the boundaries of what's possible for one-to-one B2C engagement.

Formerly of Walmart and Groupon, Vijay Chittoor has become one of the leading evangelists for the use of AI in martech. He spoke to Joel Harrison about how this technology is emerging from the fog of hype to become a real force for change in marketing – in all sectors and industries – and what B2B marketers need to do about it.

How did you come to start working in AI in marketing?

Before founding Blueshift, my co-founders and I spent the past 10 years working at the intersection of AI and marketing; early on, we worked at the AI company Kosmix that was later acquired by Walmart to become @WalmartLabs, powering marketing technology with AI. Later we founded Mertado, which became Groupon Goods. We saw firsthand that today's marketing teams have to deal with nearly 1000 times more customer data and 10 times the number of channels than 10 years ago. AI in the hands of marketers is the answer to solving this complexity. That's why we built Blueshift to be an AI-first customer data platform for cross-channel marketers.

What's your mission as a company with regards to AI? What's the opportunity or the need that you've identified?

Our mission is to put AI in the hands of every marketer.

Do you think the hype surrounding AI in marketing is being matched by reality? With regards to both B2B and B2C.

A recent Gartner report summed it up well, when it said that "AI's capacity to transform marketing is obscured by a fog of hype, but the breakthroughs are real". Among our customers, we are seeing AI marketers drive dramatic revenue lift on multiple channels. For instance, Tradera, a subsidiary of PayPal, increased gross revenue by 125% on its website through predictive recommendations.
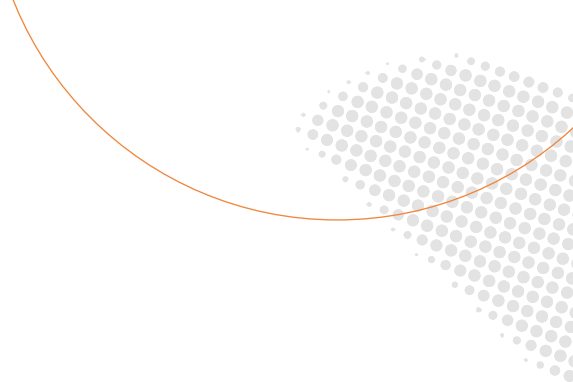
Is B2C ahead of B2B in terms of understanding or deployment of AI? If so, how and why?

The B2C marketer has faced more pressure to react in real-time after making sense of large amounts of customer data, especially digital customer interaction data. This has led B2C marketers to embrace AI-based real-time predictive decision-making, going all the way from insight to action. This is different from B2B use cases that typically involve machine learning-based predictive analytics, but often don't have an AI-based decision engine component. However, this might change soon, especially as B2B embraces the consumerisation of enterprise technology.

If it's not, what's holding it back, and what can we do about that?

The biggest factors holding back the adoption of AI in marketing are around access to data. Our study (which

polled the views of 200 B2C marketers) found that while 77% of marketing execs saw AI adoption going up, very few were able to deploy advanced AI use cases successfully. The study identified that the biggest barriers to AI adoption were issues around customer data, and how easily it can be accessed and analysed.

Is it correct there are various misunderstandings about what AI actually is and what it can do? For example, the difference between true AI and machine learning?

There is certainly some misunderstanding about AI in marketing, especially because marketers have seen basic machine learning applications (like bid optimisation) for several years. While these basic ML applications were on the periphery of the customer experience, today's AI applications can drive the core of the experience. Decision engines powered by AI can go beyond insights to action in real-time, determining the right audience for a marketing campaign, auto-populating the marketing message with one-to-one recommendations, and delivering the message on the customer's channel of choice. The self-learning components of AI can continuously optimise the customer journey.

How is the technology likely to develop in the next few years, and what opportunities will it present?

Just like AI technology in cars is moving from driver-assist to self-driving cars, AI in marketing will start becoming pivotal in orchestrating the entire customer journey. AI will enable marketers to orchestrate campaigns based entirely on a customer's self-directed journey.

Should we be scared of AI?

AI could sound scary initially, but marketers who have the right kind of platforms and processes are getting increasingly comfortable with AI. Platforms that offer 'explainable' AI, instead of black-box solutions, remove the scare factor of AI. In terms of process, we see the best success with AI when marketers are empowered to use customer data and insights in their marketing campaigns without a lengthy involvement from IT and data science teams.

How long is ignoring it going to be an option for?

Marketers have no option but to embrace AI today. Customer experience is the new battlefield for competitive advantage. In the AI-first world, the only survivors on this battlefield will be the ones who embrace AI at the core of their marketing and customer experience strategies.

Is it going to revolutionise our world, or is it going to be more of a gradual, pernicious evolution?

My belief is the use of AI by non-technical teams, especially marketers, will unlock transformational business value. Every few years, as a key technology matures and is ready to be adopted by customer focused teams, a new wave of enterprise value gets unleashed. The use of AI by marketers is likely to be one of the biggest such waves and is going to have a revolutionary impact on businesses.

If you're a marketer focused on generating leads or driving sales, in a high-pressure, results-orientated environment, why should you make time to worry about AI?

The value-add of AI is that it can crunch ever-increasing volumes of data to make better, quicker decisions about the 'who, what, when and where' of cross-channel marketing. This kind of speed and intelligence is very helpful to marketers who are focused on driving revenue in the short term. Blueshift's study on AI in B2C, in partnership with TechValidate, has shown that three-quarters of businesses improve revenue with AI.

What do B2B marketers need to know about AI today?

Artificial intelligence is only as smart as the data it is receiving. Marketers find the biggest gains you can make in driving results from AI will come from using more of their data. Using the analogy of cars, everyone can see self-driving cars are finally becoming a reality only because of a massive amount of map and street view data that helps the AI anticipate every possible scenario. Similarly, in the world of marketing, it will be very important to tap into all sources of customer data. As they embark on their AI journey, marketers must prioritise activating their customer data.

'I can see your future… web page' – Service Max ramps up demos with journey-predicting AI

Whichever data or statistics you look at, it's pretty clear B2B buyers' use of the web to make purchasing or specification decisions is increasing exponentially. Buyers are empowered more than ever before to source and compare solutions and providers in detail at a time and place to suit them – and brands are responding by raising their content games in a bid to capture a greater share of this online interest.

But once you've got potentially interested parties to your site, via great SEO, social or whatever, what is next? How do you ensure they find the right content for their needs, have a good experience of your site and (more importantly) do something to signify and flag to you that they're a prospect? That's difficult for a small B2B company, with a relatively limited and defined product or service area, but for larger organisations it can become almost impossible, due to the sheer complexity of their offering, and wealth of associated site content.

This was exactly the challenge facing field service technology vendor ServiceMax back in 2016. The company had recently been acquired by GE, and it was looking to use the enhanced recognition afforded by being part of this globally recognised brand to expand its footprint and discover new markets.

Pushing the boundaries

This inflection point, and the many challenges inherent within it, led to ServiceMax instigating a relationship with programmatic ABM solutions specialist DemandBase. "From the very beginning,

ServiceMax has been a very good customer of ours – always interested in new technology and in working with us to push the boundaries of what's possible," says Seth Myers, director of data science at DemandBase. "We've introduced them early into new solutions that we've developed, and they've been willing to invest."

One of the first challenges that ServiceMax sought to address via its relationship with DemandBase was that of providing a better, more relevant journey for website visitors, which made them more likely to become a prospect and (ultimately) customer. In particular, ServiceMax wanted to ensure the suggested content visitors saw on which page they landed on was as relevant as possible to them and their needs – but that's easier said than done. As Seth Myers explains, historically the primary means to address this was content personalisation around individual visitors, but the human effort involved in delivering this at any meaningful scale is enormous and generally prohibitive.

Predicting visitors' future journeys

Instead, ServiceMax deployed DemandBase's Site Optimization solution, which uses AI to automate and improve this process. Myers explains: "The solution takes all of the information that we have about a visitor, everything from firmographic to intent data, and uses that to predict the next page they will go to."

Unsurprisingly, ServiceMax had a number of key pages in mind that it wanted to prioritise, such as demos for specific products or its annual conference,

but given the huge range of visitors in different job functions and breadth of solution portfolio, the AI-empowered platform had to work out which visitors to serve with which messages.

A good analogy for this is Google Maps," says Seth Myers. "When you put a destination into Google Maps, it shows you the one that takes the least amount of time. But the point is, it has reviewed every possible route. As each page loads on the ServiceMax site, recommendations and snippets appear, acting like a navigable bar on the site. The AI understands the context of the page within a likely journey."

A true pioneer

The type of AI used in this context is called Reinforcement Learning, which is similar to that used by DeepMind in the recent AlphaGo project, which made headlines by beating a world expert in the complex strategy game, Go (the subject of a 2015 Netflix documentary). "I don't believe this has been productised yet anywhere else, so we're very proud of it," says Myers.

The results of deploying this AI-enabled solution are impressive. Bounce rates have decreased by 70%, while both time-on-site and pages-per-session have increased by more than 100%. But most important of all, demos increased significantly.

As the solution has been refined, its new capabilities have been brought to bear to address this challenge. "The first version of the technology only operated on an account level. The latest version offers data on intent at an individual visitor basis," says Myers. "It considers which pages they've read before, and understands what they care about."

Myers is clearly proud of the thinking and technological nous that has gone into developing this solution, but while he's excited about the future potential for AI in DemandBase's solutions, he regards it purely as a means to an end. "Our customers don't buy from us because we use AI, but because we have the best solutions to their problems."
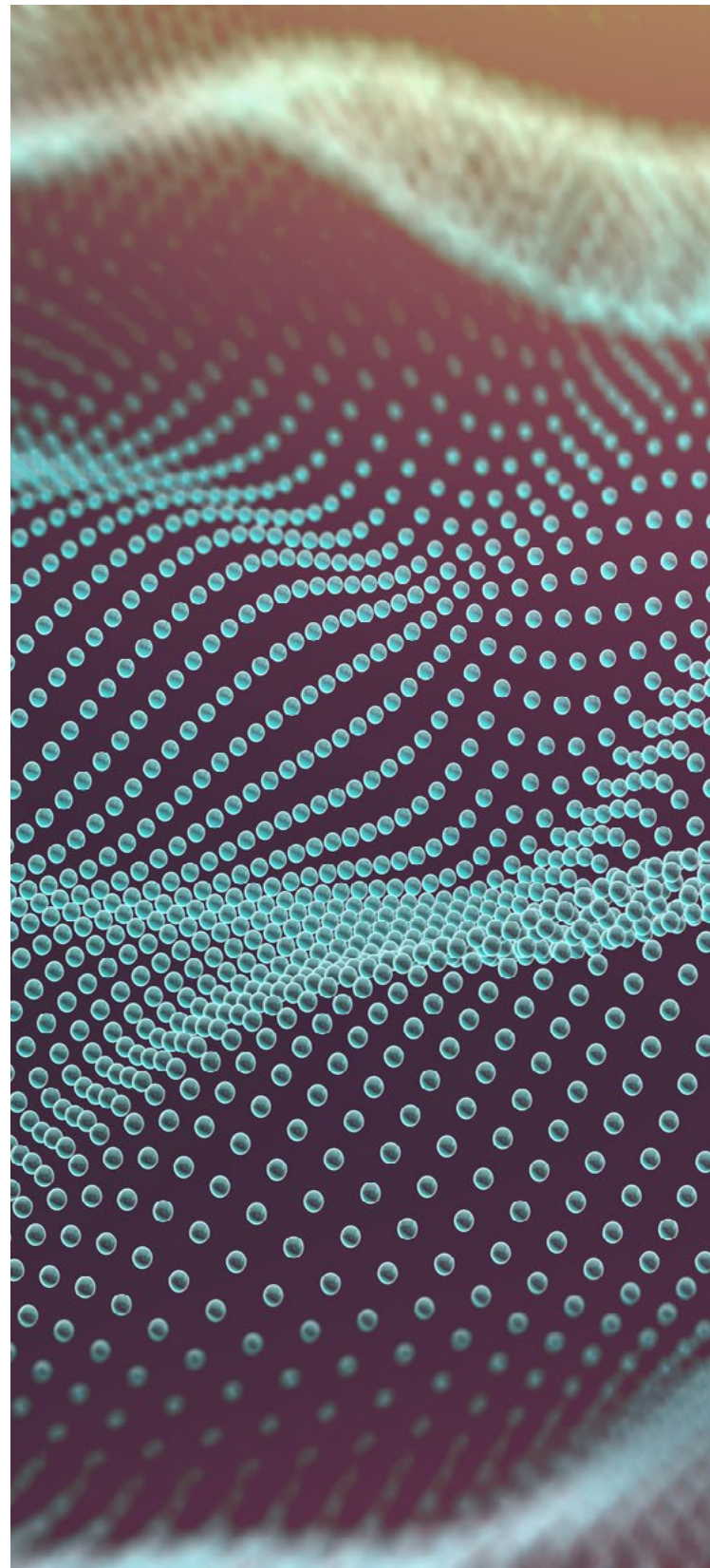
Artesian ramps up engagement and evangelises AI with Arti

In today's B2B buying world, offering 24/7 customer service, 365 days a year, is no longer optional. Buyers are simply too informed, too savvy and too fickle, and demand an excellent digital customer experience wherever in the world they are, and whenever they choose to engage with your brand. They expect informed, relevant and above all satisfactory answers immediately, and that could relate to a minor service issue, or as part of scoping for a major new deal or existing customer renewal – B2B brands can't pick and choose, and need to offer the same level of service to all.

These rising customer expectations mean that both sales and customer service teams need help. That support is being provided by a new generation of conversational AI platforms (CAPs), often referred to as chatbots.

While early iterations of chatbot technology were erratic in terms of functionality and consequently sometimes dismissed as a gimmick, CAPs are increasingly being recognised as not just a viable solution to this thorny customer experience issue, but also a means of enhancing CX, increasing brand perceptions and (most compellingly of all) delivering hard commercial returns.

One company to have experienced success with CAPS is UK-based sales insights specialist Artesian Solutions. Artesian's tech continually analyses millions of online sources for data on markets, organisations, individuals and topics to gather insights that help build better relationships and drive winning sales behaviour – all built using AI. The vendor wanted to reach out to its fairly diverse universe of decision-makers (including heads of sales, heads of relationship management, COOs, sales operations etc) to demonstrate the power and potential of its platform to address a number of pain-points, including simplifying complex sales cycles, getting ahead of competitors and building strong relationships. Ultimately though, it wanted to drive sales.

The fact Artesian's own platform is built using AI was something the vendor wanted to accentuate, and made its decision to work with AI-specialist B2B tech agency Volume, something of a no-brainer. Volume wanted to do something different to catch the attention of Artesian's target audience, and to convince them of the potential of AI to meet business needs.

To achieve this, Volume developed a programme leveraging its expertise with CAPs, which it had built up over recent years. The programme featured a number of conventional marketing assets, including a digibook, infographic, social posts and emails etc – but at the centre of the initiative was a CAP, specifically designed for Artesian Solutions, named 'Arti', in a bid to humanise and provide personality to a technology that it wanted to encourage engagement with. It launched in October 2017.

Insight-driven engagements

The deployment of Arti within the programme was designed to deliver a number of specific benefits. As well as providing the cost-effective, round-the-clock engagement capability identified above, Arti also enabled a high level of personalisation and

prospect insight, providing a better experience to the target audience and assisting sales people to make an informed, relevant and timely follow-up. Arti also assessed and reported on both prospect risk and opportunity, based on up-to-date news on that particular client.

"Arti was born out of a collaborative relationship between Artesian and Volume as we worked on a wider campaign focused on the benefits of AI functionality within our own service," says Stuart Newton, director of marketing at Artesian Solutions. "It has been well-received by our customers, prospects and partners, who continue to improve Arti's cognitive ability and effectiveness as a lead-generation tool, just by asking questions about Artesian."

And it's this progressive learning functionality which Volume believes is fundamental to the potential of CAPs as a B2B customer engagement and insight tool. Chris Sykes, CEO of Volume, comments, "We're able to train Arti, enabling it to learn faster and answer more questions. We do this by collating information on each user (their name, company they work for, their email address, the questions they ask and the answers Arti gives), which allows us to access and analyse detailed daily reports, work out key user activity and potential leads to follow up on, and carry out training and updates to ensure Arti continues to perform at the highest possible level."

Sykes says the first challenge was to drive engagement with Arti, which in turn accelerated its learning and its ability to drive results for Artesian. In the first month of launch, it was viewed 2000 times, was asked over 3500 questions, was involved in over 1000 sessions with at least 750 unique visitors from at least 60 different organisations across industries like tech, finance, retail and professional services.

In the year since it has been active, it has increased monthly website traffic by 11%, answered more than 5000 questions with what Volume claims is an accuracy rate of 99.1%, and has responded to enquiries from 65 different countries, demonstrating its multinational capabilities and potential. Most important of all, since going live, Arti has increased Artesian's prospect pool by a factor of four.

What is a CAP?

CAP stands for conversational AI platform – CAPs are applications that interact with users through engaging text-based or voice-controlled conversations, that are powered by natural language processing (NLP), machine learning (ML) and text-to-speech technology.

VMware streamlines and accelerates content programme with Acrolinx

Content has never been so important in B2B marketing as it is today, in our increasingly inbound, buyer-savvy world. Most B2B organisations are steadily (and in some cases dramatically) increasing their content output, and ensuring that quality, consistency and deliverability doesn't suffer as a result is a growing challenge.

This was particularly the case for virtualisation and cloud infrastructure vendor VMware in 2015 when it was actively seeking to scale its operations and needed to ensure its content activities grew by a corresponding amount. However, a quick examination of the existing scenario by Laura Bellamy, VMware's director of information experiences, showed that far from being robust and scalable, its existing content operation was struggling and needed assistance to meet current output targets and quality thresholds.

At that time, VMware had 120 technical writers, supporting more than 400 content releases per year, overseen by five editors, who reviewed all content prior to publication – at least in theory. The reality was that due to the sheer volume of material, the editors simply weren't able to review everything produced, and because they were so swamped they ended up focusing on only 1% of the total output.

Layered on top of that, team churn and transition meant key roles were often being performed by contractors and freelancers, with a consequent impact on quality and consistency – all this conspired to create genuine business risk through substandard content. This was an issue Bellamy needed to address without delay.

Meanwhile, VMware itself and its products and services were undergoing transition. Following an efficiency drive, the product release cycle shortened from six weeks to an average of two weeks, with twice-daily releases happening

on certain products in extreme scenarios. All this conspired to create a relentless content production requirement, and one which appeared less and less likely to be met by the existing set up. Bellamy recognised she needed to think completely differently to meet this challenge.

Better content, faster

The solution came in the form of AI-enabled content solution Acrolinx. The platform automates basic editing functions, such as repetitive corrections, allowing VMware's editors to be redeployed to higher-value activities, such as taxonomy, classifications, training better writers, and successfully onboarding new team members. "There are a lot of ways you can use editors once you free them from trying to cover that scale," says Bellamy.

Beyond greater efficiency from an organisational perspective, research shows employees across the organisation have noticed demonstrable improvements to content since deployment of Acrolinx: 73% of VMware employees who have used the software say it's helped them improve the quality of their content, while 60% say it's made them more efficient content creators.

But while speed and efficiency are important, VMware has seen an arguably more significant benefit in terms of de-risking content output that doesn't meet its quality threshold, and allowing managers to address any related issues.

"It really helped focus resources and attention on improving the content quality where it will have the most impact," says Bellamy. "Acrolinx ensures we have a minimum level of quality verified before content goes out the door. And it helps us in emergency situations where you need to write it today and publish it by the afternoon."

Backing up tech investment decisions

Management of the production process is just one part of the content marketing challenge – another key aspect relates to data, analytics, and ultimately budget management. In short, the content team needs data to demonstrate the effectiveness of its content output at a business unit level in order to back up investment decisions, and the ability to slice and dice data to respond to other reporting needs.

The Acrolinx platform's integrated analytics functionality provides real-time dashboards on the results of content activity, ensuring transparency for everyone in the company, Bellamy explains. "We needed to figure out a way to get a quantitative report on quality. It needed to be in real time since business leaders want to know what you're doing now, so business decisions can be made right away," she says.

Looking ahead, VMware's next challenge is to review its content 'tone-of-voice', with a view to ultimately improving customer experience, and is using Acrolinx to do that, leveraging the data provided by the platform to understand success of content assets to date to inform that decision making. She is also seeking to enable greater self-service functionality for the various teams she serves, removing additional manual tasks from the central content team.

Meanwhile, Andrew Bredenkamp, founder and CEO at Acrolinx, says the company is focused on further enhancing the AI-enabled capabilities of the platform. But he is quick to dismiss suggestions that its use of AI is any kind of bandwagon-jumping exercise, to tap into the hype and mystique around this technology. "AI has always been at the core of our platform," he says, explaining the firm was a spin-off from the German Research Centre for AI (which is comparable to US-based SRI). "When we launched, we didn't really focus on our AI credentials – we didn't think it was of relevance to anyone. They were more interested in what the solution could bring. About 18 month ago, we started saying 'we're an AI company.' We don't promote ourselves aggressively as such, but we still talk about it. Marketers are under a lot of pressure to be faster and better at what they're doing, and everyone is looking at the possibilities of automation at scale."

Ingersoll Rand's meteoric AI journey

Here's a challenge which most 21st century B2B marketers will identify with: you know you have a diverse set of customers, with very different information needs and preferences, representing a plethora of opportunities. But your marketing is limited to generic campaigns, treating your audience (largely) as a homogenous mass – you know if you could personalise messages based on order histories, company/individual preferences, digital engagement and even localised events in their region, you could significantly increase opportunities. But you just don't know how…

This was the situation that the HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) division of Ingersoll Rand found itself in recently, and resolved to address. Melanie Fox, formerly digital engagement leader at Ingersoll Rand, explained the marketing challenge the company faced: "Our businesses have a broad variety of customers, each with their own specific needs. For example, an HVAC servicing technician uses a very different set of our services than a self-servicing owner does — and messages or promotions that would resonate with one of those groups wouldn't necessarily be relevant to the other."

Fox says she and her team recognised the need for a change in mentality and approach: to move away from 'batch-and-blast' marketing to very generic groups of customers, and towards building localised and highly-targeted groups with specific identified needs. "To achieve that goal at scale without increasing the size of our team, we knew we would need a way to dramatically improve the efficiency of our marketing processes, which were based heavily on manual, time-consuming work," she explains. This need and desire for genuinely new thinking, and a

new approach, led Fox and her team to start looking at the potential for AI to address Ingersoll Rand's challenges.

Re-imagining marketing automation through AI

Marketing automation is a mature technology category which is genuinely well-understood and widely used. However, the use of AI to power marketing automation platforms is still in its infancy with market-leading vendors Eloqua and Marketo making little noise about this functionality. By contrast, IBM has just announced the integration of its high-profile Watson AI platform into its Campaign Automation platform (part of its Marketing Cloud integrated suite of solutions).

Mark Simpson, VP of commerce and marketing at IBM, explains the augmentation of its marketing automation platform to leverage its high-profile Watson AI platform is much more than just a badging exercise, leveraging Watson's brand equity in a competitive marketing automation sector. "You don't get to use the Watson brand lightly! You need permission from the Watson business unit, and we needed to demonstrate the new platform used a significant amount of AI functionality."

He describes the Watson Campaign Automation as effectively a "re-imagining of the experience of using marketing automation", through a much more seamless access to campaign data, which will increasingly predict what information marketers are likely to need, and proactively make suggestions about how to improve campaign performance.

Take the weather with you

"One of the things that impressed us most about the IBM solution was its ability to automate time-consuming processes such as segmentation – enabling us to build personalised campaigns at speed and scale," explains Fox. "For example, we can now create campaigns with dynamic content designed to appeal to specific customer roles. This means we can reuse the same basic campaign template, but show the recipients different creative, information and images depending on factors such as their job title."

When aligned with IBM's WeatherFX solution, the Campaign Automation platform has enabled Ingersoll Rand to create truly localised and geo-specific campaigns, driving prospects to dealer events and even responding to incidents of inclement weather (e.g. hail storms, which can be potentially very damaging to external aircon hardware) by sending 'prompter' messages around servicing and upgrade. This weather-related contextual data adds another layer to Ingersoll Rand's customer view.

"It's not just extreme hot and cold conditions that affect HVAC servicing needs; adverse conditions such as flooding also have a huge impact," says Fox. "When bad weather strikes, we can proactively reach out to customers in the cities affected. For example, if a hailstorm has recently battered an area, we can share advice that customers should check their HVAC coils for damage, and share a link to contact their local store for more support."

Building on early success

Deployment of this AI-enabled marketing automation platform has enabled Fox and her team to devise and deliver automated and dramatically more personalised campaigns based on customers' individual circumstances and needs. Fox says she is seeing substantial improvements in campaign performance metrics such as open rates, click-through rates and conversions. This has enabled them to cultivate and maintain ongoing long-term dialogue with both prospects and existing customers, driving both engagement and loyalty.

"We can now create campaigns with dynamic content designed to appeal to specific customer roles. This means we can reuse the same basic campaign template, but show the recipients different creative"

"We want to form long-term business relationships with our customers, and help them maximise the value of their investment in HVAC solutions," she adds.

While it's still early days in Ingersoll Rand's AI-enabled marketing automation journey, Fox is clearly enthused by the possibilities and determined to ensure they deploy more of the platform's functionality. "Our journey with intelligent marketing automation is just beginning, and we're very excited by what the future holds. Looking ahead, we're particularly interested in the potential of cognitive solutions to deliver decision-support for our marketers. For example, this might involve suggesting audience profiles for campaigns we might not otherwise have considered," concludes Fox. "We're confident our IBM digital marketing solutions will empower us to build even closer relationships with our customers in the years to come."

Simpson says the ultimate vision for Watson Campaign Automation is something akin to the Jarvis virtual butler from the Iron Man films, where marketers can instruct the platform to do something verbally, with minimal fuss or hassle. "We're still quite a long way from this right now," he says, adding that IBM has now rolled out AI functionality to most of its customers, but the biggest productivity improvements are yet to come.

Closing thoughts

AI is not the future: it's here and now. So what are you going to do about it?

It's clear from this report that AI has well-and-truly arrived as a B2B marketing technology, and is starting to have a significant impact on campaigns and programmes at the sharp end. True, at this stage, adoption is still confined to a relatively finite group of early adopters, most of whom are in the tech industry themselves – as an industry it's typically at the bleeding edge of martech adoption.

But mainstream adoption is just around the corner – it's just a matter of time before every marketing solution and every tech stack will feature AI in some area or other.

As Phil Clement, former CMO of Aon, put it bluntly in our recent report on post-modern marketing, "AI will increasingly determine which firms win and which firms lose." Understanding its relevance, and evaluating where and how to utilise its power, is rapidly ceasing to be optional – pretty soon it's going to be a necessity.

However, at the same time, AI is just a means to an end. There was a clear consensus from the vendors I spoke to that while there has been a lot of hype around AI (both good and bad) it's ultimately not the reason why marketers buy their solutions. They buy them because they understand and can demonstrably address their challenges.

It won't be too long before the fact a solution or platform is powered by AI ceases to be something that is comment worthy, or worth investigating. It will be a hygiene factor: something that might be of interest to a technologist, but not to the average marketer. Its use will be the norm, rather than the exception, and its presence will cease to be noteworthy. And given how fast our future seems to be racing towards us, this will most likely happen sooner than we expect.

Right now, those brave enough to embrace AI, wherever and whenever it's relevant, stand to gain a significant headstart over the rest. So the questions marketers must ask themselves are, what are you doing to embrace its potential, and how's it going to fit into your tech stack?

About

B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as *B2B Marketing* magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats.

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