

The Lost Art of Conversation: Making AI Work For You.....Sorta'



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My mum, God bless her, can talk the leg off a wooden chair. This gift (or curse) is driven by genuine interest in others and a broader curiosity regarding the circumstances of her fellow humans. Her predisposition for conversations with strangers has resulted in lifelong friendships, in some cases with people on the other side of the world. She doesn't do social media or take selfies, she just connects with people at a personal level. I'd like to think she has influenced others to appreciate the value of real conversation, as her example has certainly had a profound impact on me. My mum isn't getting any younger and a recent medical event left her unable to speak for a short period. While my dad appeared strangely relieved, the episode got me thinking about the evolving nature of communication.

I recently made an enquiry of a well-known and highly regarded company providing services to the accommodation sector. The enquiry was to clarify a very simple matter that had come up in the process of engaging the company to provide services. My email was addressed to what I thought was a human, I like dealing with humans and buying stuff off them. Anyway, I got a friendly albeit completely insincere response from a machine with a name, who told me how important I was and that we were now friends. My question remained unanswered. I won't publish the machine's name, but let's call him Alfred. I'll tell you why later.

This sort of "let our machine be your friend" strategy might appeal to a certain demographic but it sure ain't me. The message it sends is not one of customer care or even a desire to sell a product. For me the message is, we care so little about you that we use a machine to save us having to pay a human. If we make the not unreasonable assumption that people buy stuff off people they like and have rapport with, then the machine solution looks like a dumb idea, and it is.

As I write this sitting in an airport (yeah yeah, quite the life, I know!) I get a text from the hotel I'm staying at on the other end of my flight. It's from a machine and asks me to do a pre arrival check in to ensure access to my room. Panic sets in. I suck at this online stuff and my flight is being called. I ring the hotel and get a lovely bloke who tells me no stress, that's just an auto text everyone gets. Safe flight and see you soon.

Same experience with the service provider with whom I'm now in an intimate relationship, via machines. When I finally get a human she's super helpful and problem solved.

You've all had similar experiences I'm sure so I won't labour the point. My fear is that companies, in the eternal quest for profit, will continue to use insincere, impersonal robotics to replace humans and to hell with the experience the punters end up enduring. In the absence of humans we will be forced to bend to the will of the machines. A bit dramatic? Have a listen to how you pronounce and use phrases when talking to Siri or any of the other voice activated command environments. Try to communicate with companies that have abdicated customer relations to bots, apps and other forms of non-human interaction. I can see where this is going and it makes me happy. How so you ask?

My prediction is that as society continues to lean toward communication via text, social media, emails, apps, voice activation and robots, the pool of people who can actually string a reasonably intelligent sentence together will diminish. The capacity to think on your feet, speak in clear terms, and invite conversation, will be seen as a rare commodity and valued accordingly.

This is good news if you are in sales and have the gift of the gab. With so much communication being undertaken via non verbal means with zero capacity to use body language (unless you play footy and like posting interesting photos of course), I expect conversation and rapport building skills to take on even greater significance in the hiring and firing decisions of sales focused companies.

Of course, I understand that consumer products designed to be purchased online really require no human interaction and may the bots rule. However, for big ticket items like cars, houses and businesses I can't imagine a machine will have a lot of luck closing a sale, particularly if the buyer has reservations. Skilled sales people can think on their feet, change tack based on verbal and non verbal signals, build interpersonal trust and rapport and know when to hit the gas and when to back off. Even if a machine that could do all this pitched me a deal, I wouldn't trust the thing. Who wrote the code that drives its moral compass, sense of compassion, value of the social compact and ideals of fair play and integrity? No thanks, I'll take a human trying really hard to sell me something and being very good at it.

Here's a little test. If you are in sales you should be able to walk up to any other human who speaks the same language and start a conversation out of thin air. When I say any other human I of course exclude certain members of motorcycle clubs and any employees of USA Customs. The former may think you're a cop, and the latter are already robots with very unpleasant programming. The conversation out of thin air skill is becoming a relic of a bygone age so if you can do it you are becoming a rare and valuable breed.

I'll leave you with this. Most studies on communication suggest that 7% of meaning is communicated via the spoken word, 38% via tone of voice, and 55% through body language. Not sure how the bots are going to go with that. For what it's worth I've tested this theory on the managing director and found that depending on how stupid or irritating I've been the percentages can sometimes get skewed. I seem to receive a bit of 99% tone communication interspersed with 100% body language, which I mostly deserve.

PS: Back in the day when computers first came in, just about every mainframe monster had the same name... Alfred. 'A Large F*cking Ridiculous Electronic Device'. I wonder if 'Because Others Try Stuff' will enter the language?

Have a happy and successful 2025 all you born salespeople out there. And remember, non-verbal communication does not include holding the pen while the buyer signs.

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