# The Customer Interface Is Conversational. It's Time to Engage.

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Every business in the digital age contends with the challenges of effectively communicating with its customers across all the available—and proliferating—channels. They must continually integrate new channels into existing communication experiences or succumb to a fragmented customer experience with low engagement.



The ideal customer experience allows customers to interact on the channel of their choice, all while maintaining the context of those interactions. Brands that offer this type of omnichannel customer experience are winning new customers and earning their loyalty. Messaging applications, in particular, have forced businesses to evolve their customer communications capabilities.

The stakes are no less than a company's survival in what Forrester has dubbed the age of the customer. Today, as CIO.com has reported, "the power has shifted away from companies and towards digitally savvy, technology-empowered customers who now decide winners and losers."

And just as the technology available for communicating has evolved, so has the manner in which customers communicate—not only with each other but also with brands. The line between what consumers expect in their personal communication experiences and what they expect from their interactions with brands has blurred, with brands increasingly being expected to carry on the same types of conversations we have with colleagues, friends and even family.

## From Interactions to Conversations

When the telephone call was the primary way of communicating—think of two people connecting via the PSTN (public switched telephone network)—the real-time, synchronous nature of the medium shaped the tone of the exchange. The caller intended to engage

with one other party and usually dialed with a specific purpose in mind. In the customer-to-business context, the purpose could be to troubleshoot a technical glitch with a manufacturer's device or to reconcile a mysterious charge on his or her credit card bill.

The phone call naturally took on a transactional tone:

1. The caller presents an issue.
2. The business provides a solution (hopefully).
3. The interaction ends.
4. *Transaction complete.*

However, the phone call—while it may have served the purpose of resolving the customer's issue in a given instance—does not inherently convey the all-important context of the customer's inquiry. The customer will need to provide the details of that glitchy device (e.g. model number, year of release, etc.) or their credit card account to help the service agent identify the right solution. Once provided, that context does not automatically carry over to a follow-up call from the same customer should they need further assistance.

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Even if the agent who responded to the initial call took notes and saved them to the customer's profile, the agent who fields the follow-up call will be reliant on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of those notes. Did they capture enough context for the second agent to get up to speed on the customer's issue history quickly while speaking to the customer?

The audio of the first call—a complete record of the interaction—likely wasn't saved for future reference. Let alone any other relevant customer context that may have been shared in a different channel, such as email or chat. Communications often are siloed by channel with no connection to a single user.

## Enter Messaging and Unending Conversation Threads

The advent of IP-based or OTT (over-the-top) messaging apps such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and WeChat, has changed the nature of people's interactions. Unlike the synchronous, point-to-point nature of the traditional phone call, messaging apps are asynchronous, bidirectional and inclusive by nature, allowing multiple participants to join in a conversation. And they maintain an accessible history of the conversation for all participants.

Rather than a series of discrete telephone interactions—transactional exchanges that began and ended sometime in the past—messaging opens the door to a conversation, a continuum of interactions between brands and customers. This reflects the natural communication that people have among themselves. Human conversations don't begin and end anew with every interaction; they carry with them the context of prior conversations.

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You may call a friend you've known for years about something specific—say, confirming the date for your next outing—but you inevitably will talk about related topics from your history, like a mutual friend who bowed out of the last outing at the eleventh hour... and why you keep inviting him when he does that all the time... and when was the last time anyone actually saw him out of the house... but I digress. The point is the memories from conversations you've had in the past remain in a shared history that you and your friend can invoke to enhance a current or future conversation.

More and more, customers are expecting to have the same type of fluid conversations with brands. They expect brands to know their profile and history regardless of the channel on which that history was made. Chris Messina's declaration that 2016 would be the year of conversational commerce was prophetic, but the moniker may have been too conservative. It's not just commerce that is now conversational; it's customer support, services, and online marketplace transactions.
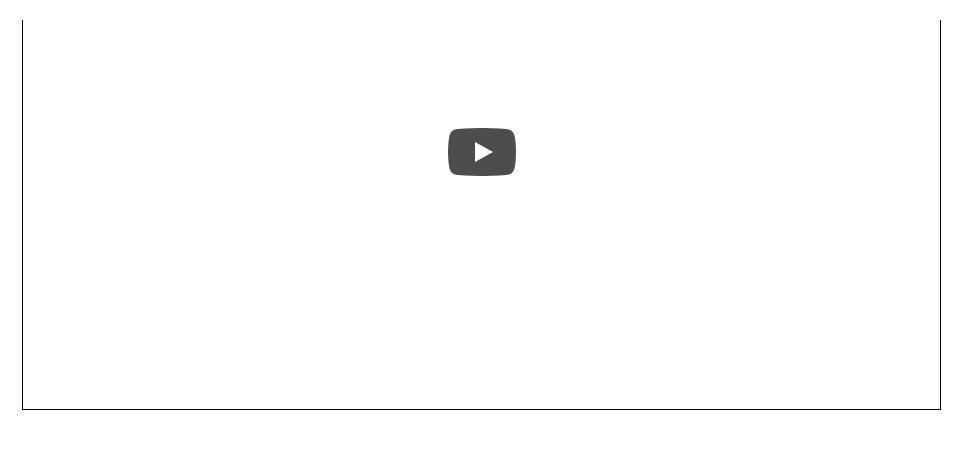
This means businesses can no longer view their communications with customers as a series of purpose-driven interactions that can be evaluated on an individual basis, i.e. if the customer came away satisfied from the majority of those interactions, then the business can count that user as a satisfied customer. Or, from a marketing perspective, an outbound communication had a higher-than-expected response rate so that particular campaign was a success.

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Messaging, and the expectations it's engendering in consumers, has changed the communications landscape. No longer reliant on telephones and the PSTN to connect two parties, consumers can use messaging to make peer-to-peer connections that bypass the network altogether. And messaging can be embedded within an application or service, leveraging the context in which it's being used and offering an interface that is also conversational.

For reference, here's my breakdown of the omnichannel conversations concept from an episode of the Nexmo video series *Communications in Context*.

**What Are Omnichannel Conversations?**

## Engage in the Conversation Customers Want to Have

The communication evolution presents a great opportunity for brands to deliver exceptional customer experiences. By embedding messaging into branded chat experiences on their mobile or web apps, brands can invite their customers to have a conversation with them directly on the channel that the customers prefer.

And because customers tend to choose their preferred messaging channel based on their social graph, i.e. they'll use WhatsApp most of the time if that's where all their friends are—businesses have the opportunity to further segment and optimize those customers' experiences.

Imagine how much better a customer's experience would be when the response to an inquiry is not only a seamless in-app interchange but is also informed by the context of all prior interactions. The experience goes well beyond just saving the customer from needing to repeat their account information. Interjecting additional contextual information into the conversation, which the customer isn't expecting, will exceed those ever-growing expectations.

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