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APR 25, 2017 17:11 PM

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AI Helping Marketers Better Engage Customers

By Neal Leavitt

Artificial intelligence (AI), to use a hackneyed term, is already causing a paradigm shift for marketers. AI, in brief, is helping brands to rapidly collaborate with and learn from online followers.

And while there probably exists many a Luddite that deems AI a pervasive jobs threat, the flip side is that it may be a golden opportunity to let the machines do mundane stuff like customer support, enabling humans to become more creative.

The issue, of course, is that data is everywhere these days. But the underlying problem, noted Tara Thomas, a content writer for Boomtrain, a market technology firm that provides AI solutions to companies/organizations, is that large chunks of data don't make things easier – "in fact, they can make things so complicated that the first instinct is to abandon the data and go by intuition alone – but this won't give you the right results."

"The technology that seems so threatening now may become our ally, amplifying our performance improvement by freeing us from tasks that today keep us locked into routines of the past and providing us with data needed to spark more imagination," added John Hagel, co-chair for Deloitte's Center for the Edge.

And HubSpot co-founder Dharmesh Shah says AI will greatly accelerate marketing and sales as "anything that seems rote or mechanical is all going to go to AI." He added that machine learning will also make sales and marketing software more effective by giving it "the ability to do things without us explicitly telling it what to do."

One real-world example of AI are facial recognition technologies. Andy Pringle, head of performance media at Performics, a digital marketing agency, provided one salient example of how brands will incorporate facial recognition technology:

"You can imagine brands asking people to give permission to be recognized in return for offers while they're out and about," said Pringle. "Say, there's a guy waiting for a bus for ages in front of a digital screen running a beer campaign. If that person likes that brand on Facebook, you can foresee either the screen saying 'hi' and giving him or her a voucher code for a free beer or triggering a voucher to be delivered to their Facebook inbox."

And IBM's Watson is being utilized by many companies. Watson, as you probably know, is an IBM supercomputer that combines artificial intelligence and analytical software; it was named for IBM's founder, Thomas J. Watson. The Watson supercomputer currently processes at a rate of 80 teraflops (trillion floating-point operations per second).

Maria Winans, CMO of IBM's commerce unit, said one recent application was for The North Face, which is using Watson's language comprehension to help customers find the perfect jacket.

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"You can also personalize using machine learning to identify the best offers and content at scale," she said. "You can project goals and trigger an alert when something isn't working, with recommendations on how to improve it."

Two other AI examples – ad targeting and 'chatbots.' With the former, Google is currently developing an AI technology called RNN – recurrent neural networks – it can recall bits of info for short durations, possibly eliminating the need for any specialized ad targeting code in the near future. And chatbots – artificial intelligences that interact with humans, are already being used to book travel, help with purchases, address rudimentary questions, and more.

Adam Fridman, who founded AdvisorTV, a Chicago-based advice and mentorship community for entrepreneurs, summed up the promise of AI:

"AI is helping today's marketers analyse data and engage customers better than ever before. AI is so quickly becoming indispensable that marketers may not even realize that the technology they use to do their jobs today was the stuff of wild-eyed imagination just a few short years ago."
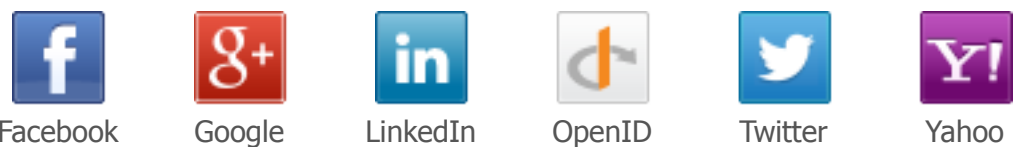
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