

# AI Smartens SMS Support



By **Martin** Vilaboy

## SkySwitch unveils customer service bot

It's been said that by 2025, most people won't be able to tell if they are interacting with another human or a machine when contacting a company or its contact center.

When that day comes, the possible reduction in costs and improvement in customer satisfaction become fairly evident.

Automation and artificial intelligence not only quell the ongoing headcount increases currently impacting contact centers, "They will free agents from working on low-value or repetitive tasks, as they will only have to

address highly complex customer scenarios or exceptions to standard operations," said Kate Leggett, Forrester vice president and principal analyst. "This also enables them to focus on building connections with customers to garner their satisfaction and loyalty."

Make no mistake, we are no longer far away from seeing some real impacts from

smart machines and artificial intelligence (AI) within business communications and contact center services. And it's not just from the likes of Google or Facebook and the major communications providers such as AT&T, CenturyLink and Windstream that will provide those capabilities.

Consider SkySwitch, for instance, a smaller provider of hosted and next-gen business communications platforms. Intrigued by the explosion around the Amazon Echo, SkySwitch president Eric Hernaez started thinking about putting Amazon's personal agent to work on the company PBX. Now, SkySwitch customers are able to control PBX features using a voice command, such as "Alexa, call Jane in accounting at her extension." This was accomplished by creating an Alexa skill that connects to the SkySwitch voice API.

"Knowing what is on the horizon, my philosophy is, I'd rather lead the charge than get run over by it," says Hernaez.

Indeed, the company also recently announced the availability for trial of a new feature that combines business SMS and an AI smart agent to address a growing trend within customer service and interaction. More and more, consumers are relying on text messaging as a means for contacting businesses. Nearly a third of U.S. online adults recently surveyed by Forrester, for instance, say they have already sent a mobile/SMS message to a company requesting assistance, while other studies have shown that the majority of millennials prefer to send texts rather than talk on the phone.

This can be a challenge for business owners, says SkySwitch, since most business phone lines still can't receive SMS messages, and even when a business phone line is enabled with business SMS, it's often difficult to ensure that an inbound SMS message gets routed to the right person in the company.

To address this problem, SkySwitch developed Sallie the SMS directory bot,

an AI smart agent that helps direct the message using business SMS to the appropriate person or department within a company. So when a text message is sent to a business number, Hernaez explains, SkySwitch employs a small application that intercepts the business message and sends it to Facebook's wit.ai API service, which allows the system to take discernible data from the message and feed it back into the routing of that message. Sallie engages with customers who send SMS messages by intelligently responding with relevant information from the company directory and taking the appropriate actions based on the responses received.

If the system, for instance, recognizes that it's a known customer texting in, and that customer has previously spo-

directions or special events, just to name a few of the possibilities. The systems also is learnable, says Hernaez, so it will get smarter and do more things as it learns and gathers more data.

"It's not an extremely smart application," says Hernaez, "but it is a way to get into the spirit of AI. And, of course, once you have the ability to interact with customers using SMS messages, it can expand."

And while it's a very narrow application, admits Hernaez, he's also quick to point out that development didn't require huge amounts of resources and expertise.

"It is really easy to take something like machine-learning and inject it into a business process," he says, "because it is all available out there through APIs."

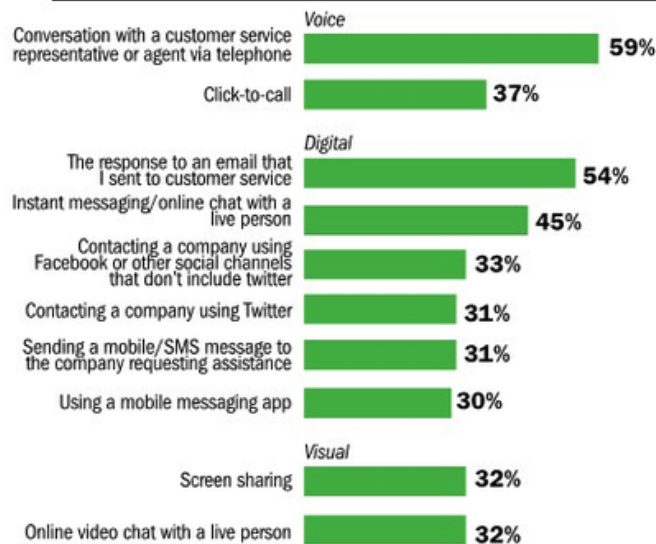
Literally hundreds of companies, says Hernaez, have developed machines algorithms and made them consumable in ways that allow companies to use the capabilities to enhance and improve products.

"You can upload data through an API, and get back intelligible results that let you take action. It's almost ridiculously simple to use them," he says. "It's there and available now; it's just about taking a very specific problem, applying AI through an API to that problem and working it into a use case."

That's good news for the customers of lots of channel partners, because their end users are increasingly expecting, and more importantly, measuring satisfaction based on smart customer services experiences that recognize them across channels, allow them to move seamlessly across channels and minimizes the time it takes to resolve a problem.

As Forrester's Leggett puts it, "your customers now decide how customer centric you need to be, not your internal operations." □

#### "Which of the following live-assist channels have you used in the past 12 months?"



Source: Forrester; survey of 4,513 U.S. online adults

ken with someone in the company, Sallie will send an autoreply by SMS that says, "You've reached the SMS support of company ABC. It looks like you have talked to Jack in the past, would you like to talk to him now?" If the customer replies "yes," using call control the systems places a call to the customer and then places a call to Jack.

Along with automatically connecting customers to the right resources in a company, Sallie also can respond to inquiries about hours of operation, driving