

Embracing a changing digital world in 2017

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Even though the past year has seen the strengthening of several 'traditional' technology trends such as cloud computing, big data, and predictive analytics, the likes of virtual and augmented reality and conversations as a platform (better known as chatbots) are already attracting interest for 2017.



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While sceptics argue that these are still novelties, there is significant potential for disrupting business across industries. In challenging economic times, the promise of more streamlined (and enhanced) ways of engaging with stakeholders and improving efficiencies in the coming months are too good to be ignored.

A new (virtual) reality

Virtual reality has been all the rage for several months now thanks to the arrival of consumer-friendly devices. And even though the mobile units (the ones you link to a cell phone) can provide a good experience, the focus will be on virtual reality (VR) for consoles and computers.

Despite the high cost (at least initially) of getting VR-ready machines, the opportunities to create virtual prototypes for products and engineer designs 'in your head' can save companies time and money. Even though 3D printing has brought down the costs of such prototyping, a virtual environment lends itself to a more intuitive design space. However, it does bring with it a natural link to create a 3D print once done on a VR level.

A more general application for VR in a business environment could also be employee training especially when it comes down to how to use expensive equipment. Such a hands-on, intensive approach will not only get employees to learn faster but it also provides a safe environment for industries such as mining, chemicals, and the like.

Enhancing your environment

Augmented reality (AR) really hit the big time earlier this year with a certain app called Pokémon Go. Everyone from school children to executives went hunting for these creatures, creating a bit of a craze around the globe.

But what of more mainstream, business uses of AR? For one, it could change the retail experience. Imagine watching a television show and really liking a dress or piece of equipment you are seeing. Simply move your mobile device in front of the screen to get a shopping overlay where you can click and order the item.

Other interesting uses, which are already happening in some places around the world, include digital museum tours with factoids 'popping up' in front of paintings and other works of art.

And then of course you get map services across the windscreen of your car providing on-screen directions to points of interest or the like without having to look at a small GPS screen.

Bot speak

The third trend that has already taken root to some extent is the arrival of chatbots. The likes of Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, and other companies have invested heavily in creating these bots that provide consumers with useful information around a variety of topics or themes.

Some might balk at the idea of 'talking' to a robot, but there are plenty of examples of some bots being so advanced that they are virtually indistinguishable from a human, especially in the customer service industry.

Driven by powerful artificial intelligence, these bots have become a boon for mobile users looking to find something quickly and conveniently. The drive for more personalised content plays beautifully into the chatbot environment where companies can create more natural customer engagement using these bots.

Changing the way we engage with customers

Ultimately, in my line of business, it is evident that technology is driving a shift in customer engagement. Technology is propelling organisations to better immerse the customer (and employee) deep within the business, driving on-demand service excellence and increased brand loyalty.

With the rise of mobile and social technologies, customers are now more powerful than ever. Their always-connected status and ability to find information in seconds puts them in control of their own experience, and this trend has forced communicators and marketers to rethink how they engage and connect with their customers. AV, VR, bots and predictive analytics will drive a new era for customer engagement – with this in mind, 2017 could very well be the year of the customer.

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