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INSIDER: Rehumanize Your Business
Maria Arauz, MBA

INSIDER: Conversational Marketing
Jacob Brenton, MDiv/MBA Candidate
Picture walking down the street and seeing a beautiful store. You’ve seen ads for this store; they sell a product you’re interested in buying; and the storefront looks attractive. As you walk through the door though, you look around and are shocked to find no salesperson—just a few tables of brochures about products available. Where a cash register might normally be, you see a sign that says “Leave your name and number, and we’ll call you when we can.” How interested would you be in buying from this store? Now, take an honest look at your sales website. Is it much different?

For many years, the marketing and sales playbook for those who sell online has been the same—describe the property or product in detail, throw in a few pictures, then have a form for potential clients to fill out expressing their interest. These online forms were revolutionary years ago, but the process seems antiquated in today’s online culture.

If you already have a potential customer on your website, why make them wait for you to respond to an email days from now, when you could have a conversation with them right now?

In their book *Conversational Marketing: How the World’s Fastest Growing Companies Use Chatbots to Generate Leads 24/7/365 (And How You Can Too)*, David Cancel and Dave Gerhardt share why online conversational marketing creates a better, more natural, and more profitable sales climate. By the end of this book, even small, one-employee businesses will be encouraged to add conversational marketing to their website, supported by chatbots and a new paradigm for online sales in our current context.

**THINK POINT #1: Your Clients Would Rather Talk Now (And You Would Too)**

If you’re like many busy agents, there are probably several emails sitting in your inbox, waiting to be read, deleted, or acted upon. Though email is an invaluable tool, you probably don’t use it to plan dinner with a friend or check on your kids during the day. You likely use Facebook Messenger or iMessage to respond quickly and efficiently. What if your initial conversations with clients could be more of a friendly chat than an endless chain of emails?

Cancel and Gerhardt spend much of their book showing how readers can do just that. They do not advocate getting rid of your email address or phone number; instead, the authors propose adding a live chat widget, right there on your website, as your primary initial form of client interactions.
contact. In this method, simple issues are resolved quickly; more complex issues can receive a scheduled video call appointment with the client within the next day or two; and clients leave your site feeling valued and worth your time and attention.

Of course, the technology behind implementing live chat on your website can seem intimidating, but modern chat widgets can easily integrate into your pre-existing systems. The authors explain that chat widgets can be implemented in WordPress or SquareSpace-powered websites easily; they even suggest integrating chats into the messaging services you may already use at work, such as Slack. Even more amazingly though, some chat services can integrate seamlessly with your sales system, such as SalesForce, and make appointments in your Outlook calendar. There is a learning curve, but we mastered it with email 25 years ago, and can do it again with quick messaging.

**THINK POINT #2: You Can’t Always be Available (But a Chatbot Can!)**

The problem, of course, with instant messaging, is that you are not always available. Unless you have a dedicated 24-hour virtual receptionist staff trained and ready to field complex questions on your website, there will be times when humans simply can’t get to a smartphone or computer to reply to a client. What are you to do about chats in those times when you are at a property showing, in a meeting, or at home and wish not to be disturbed?

Cancel and Gerhardt suggest intelligent chat bots for your site. These bots will not replace human contact—these bots are coworkers. A chat bot can be trained to capture the kind of basic information you would gather as you initiate a conversation, such as name, business needs, and contact information, and they could then use openings in your calendar to book a meeting. Chat bots can also work as a sort of gatekeeper. A chatbot can be trained to triage initial conversations, answer basic questions, schedule appointments, and direct clients to the appropriate department without your input. The authors emphasize that these bots should present on the site as very obviously non-human, so that your clients don’t feel deceived. This does not mean, however, that every response a chatbot gives has to sound robotic. The chatbot should take on the same kind of language the humans on your website will use—professional but friendly, at times playful, if that fits your company culture.

Again, this concept may seem new, or so technically advanced that you could never implement it well. With today’s technology, that simply isn’t the case. The chat software you install on your website may come with chatbot options built in, or you may choose to purchase bots from a third-party vendor. Regardless, most chatbots require no coding for a basic implementation. The chat bots, of course, need to be trained and customized, like any other widget on your website, but this can be done in your website editor. In this training, you teach a chat bot how to initiate conversations, collect data, answer questions based on keyword responses or multiple-choice answers, and direct conversations to the right person. When humans and bots work together, we can realize value we didn’t expect. For example, the authors quote a 2018 study which showed
66% of millennials and 58% of baby boomers were willing to engage with a chatbot for 24-hour service, even if they seemed averse to the idea at first.

**THINK POINT #3: The Goal is Conversation (The “Hard Sell” is Dead!)**

In most cases, fully implementing Cancel and Gerhardt’s vision will require a drastic shift in your workflow and how you connect with customers. Why is it worth it? Because online sales are changing. In a world where most buyers have access to the Internet, you no longer hold a monopoly on information about your properties (or knowledge of your competitors). If you withhold helpful information until a key moment or lock your premium content behind an email subscription form, your customers can simply search for a company more willing to be upfront with them.

Cancel and Gerhardt put these chat solutions in service of what they deem “conversational marketing.” Instead of consistently upselling, the authors envision salespeople utilizing these new tools to form better relationships with their clients. The authors recommend a conversational tone based on getting to know the business needs of a client and then finding solutions to those needs together from the salesperson’s knowledge of properties. This may mean that clients don’t always end up with the most expensive solutions, but they will have built a trustworthy relationship with you, ripe for a return sale.

Of course, these conversations differ a bit from our normal “water cooler” chat about sports or politics. The goal in conversational marketing is to get the clients talking about themselves and what needs they’re looking for you to meet. The authors recommend empathy statements: repeating back your understanding of the client and their needs, along with a brief comment validating their frustrations or dreams. At this point, you can show the value of available homes, tailored to fit the needs your client just shared. You may not want to repeat every well-crafted line from your company’s website or brochures, but instead deliver custom conversation which shows that you were listening and that you can help the customer.

Finally, the authors suggest harnessing the power of data to personalize marketing. For example, if your chatbot can tell that a customer has come to your website after clicking an ad, the chatbot can welcome a client in that specific way. Personalized chat boxes can appear for the user who visits your site often or who has clicked back onto the site from an email you sent. Different chat boxes can appear on different screens, allowing different departments to play to their strengths.
These subtle, non-invasive customizations help put the customer at ease, without playing too much with their data.

THINK POINT #4: Keep the Conversation Going

Imagine now that you have implemented all of the changes Cancel and Gerhardt suggest. You’ve installed chat capabilities on your website with attentive chatbots ready to respond. Your sales and marketing team are working on adopting a conversational approach with customized solutions. After all these changes, you’re beginning to see results… and then lose all communication with your customers! Not only would the sudden end to the relationship leave your customer feeling that their conversations with you might have been disingenuous, you are going to miss out on valuable feedback and the potential to drive future sales.

Therefore, the final recommendation from these authors is no less important: build a continuous feedback loop. After you sell, set up a meeting two to three weeks later to see how the client is liking their situation, and what questions or comments they have. Elicit feedback through additional conversations and by checking in with a customer before they have problems—then keep the lines of communication open to address issues they do have. As you collect this customer feedback, don’t just let it sit on a hard drive. Take time to look at it and understand it.

However you choose to keep up with your customers, make sure that you incorporate this ongoing feedback loop through time, and maintain the relationships you’ve built. When it comes time for the client to buy again, they’ll already know who to contact.

Conclusion

Though it may seem revolutionary to some, Cancel and Gerhardt’s approach to conversational marketing uses technology to put the humanity back in business. Rather than forcing customers to wait for your availability, you can design your website to host conversations. Through these conversations, often with a human, sometimes supported with a chatbot, you can begin to build the kind of relationships that boost your business and sell properties. You come out of the experience with a deeper knowledge of what your customer needs, and they come out of it with a product tailored to their needs and a relationship with someone always willing to help. Conversational marketing, in short, is the human way to allow bots to help you build relationships, sell, and support.

Recommended Reading

About the Author

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Jacob Brenton is Master of Divinity/Master of Business Administration dual-degree graduate student from College Station, Texas. He earned his Bachelor of Science in Computer Graphic Design from the McLane College of Business at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in 2014 and then worked in a non-profit before returning to school. Jacob enjoys studying the intersections of faith, business, ethics, and technology, and he currently serves as Acting Interim Pastor of St. John United Church of Christ in Robinson, Texas.