

McNerney acted as a ghostwriter, on behalf of CEO Dennis McGuire, for a PR initiative. Please notice the *professional research* and *writing skills* needed to complete the article.

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TECHNOLOGY, TRENDS & REWARDS

# VIRTUAL ASSISTANTS EMPOWER ONLINE CUSTOMERS



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—CodeBaby



Self-service can be like herding cats. On the one hand, some people dislike the lack of any online self-service tools when making a payment or modifying account settings, while others distrust doing business with a machine. Intelligent Virtual Assistants (IVAs) bridge the chasm between these two types of customers by driving faster actions for the heavy self-service users and by becoming the branded company representative that creates an engaging and enjoyable online experience for others.



Online intelligent virtual assistants (IVAs) are powerful tools that further automate self-service interactions. IVAs can make strategically timed pre-emptive suggestions for product alternatives, essentially providing consumers what they need even before they know it themselves. They're able to handle high-volume-low-value interactions or as needed, low volume deeper product interactions and education. By design, IVAs enable customers to efficiently accomplish their online goals such as answering questions about their account, filling out forms or applications, or getting needed technical support.

In today's world where the consumer is in charge, improving and simplifying their online self-service experience will enhance your brand in their eyes. The consumer wants to interact with your brand when and how they desire, and the ease in which they can accomplish their goals regardless of channel is paramount to long term loyalty. Consumers also desire to "co-own" information and respond well to brands that seek to update and educate them. Interrupt-and-sell tactics will always have their place in the world of marketing tactics, but a key goal should be to empower customers with the key information they are seeking when they want it so they make better decisions—avoid

taking advantage of their time and bombarding them with "pop up" offers and unnecessary redirects. Leaving the consumer in control of their brand experience will ultimately improve your customer "share of wallet" and maximize their lifetime value to your organization.

Time wasted online can cost your organization money. Forrester reported that 57% of 4,653 North Americans surveyed said they would abandon an online purchase if they didn't get quick answers, and also according to the report consumers actually find agent-assisted services to be more satisfying than traditional self-services (It's Time To Give Virtual Agents Another Look, 2009).

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By proactively educating and engaging customers, companies can reduce the volume of higher cost phone contacts by employing virtual assistants to handle the more mundane calls that typically make up a significant percentage of inbound traffic. The most preferred form of escalation according to the Forrester report: "Web Sites That Don't Support Customers' Goals Waste Millions" (2012). High cost, large volume transactions drain resources. Intelligent virtual assistants easily mitigate the number of these types of calls by empowering customers to resolve their own issues.

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