AI Isn't All You Need

Human-Centered
Service Design
Makes for Good
Business

What I'm about to posit may get me some blowback, but, as my peers and colleagues know, I'm not one for complacency. Sometimes, you need to traverse tough terrain to get to your destination. And to guarantee your fellow travelers have an engaging ride.

So, here it goes: Behind every good robot lies an even better human.

As technology continues to impact even the most fundamental aspects of our daily lives – like getting our annual medical checkup, watching TV, communicating with our parents and children, planning social outings or vacations, earning a college degree, or applying for a job – we're demanding more from the products we love. No longer are we satisfied with how a product looks and feels; we expect it to enhance our lives in a significant, memorable way.

Take Facebook's recent appropriation of Snapchat-like features. The social media Goliath appears to be pilfering apps to stay relevant and maintain its edge by delivering valuable services to users. Service design has become both king and queen, and I would argue that a company that launches a product – whether that product is a car, phone, hotel, school, or even a political candidate – without supporting it with a digital ecosystem is sure to lose money.

Here's why:

People want to be involved – and have others involved – in their product experiences.

Not everyone wants to literally kiss their gadgets, but the ability to interact and give/receive pleasure with and through products is becoming expected. Users want their brands to both delight and interact with them on an emotional, as well as functional, level. Engineers, designers, and marketers of products – and their attendant services – need to be mindful that the purchasers of those products are humans, not automatons. Mutual respect and trust must be forged between user and producer to facilitate brand bonding. When a user is at one with a product, the manufacturer of said product knows it has created a hit, and probably a lucrative one.

Conversely, when consumers sense a lack of human involvement, brand loyalists grow wary. They love the magic of technology, but if they intuit that there's no heart in a product experience, then they opt out. I call this the "zombie phenomenon," as it happens when users get spooked. This usually occurs when a company doesn't consider service design during the concept stage of their development. People will fall out of love with a product that doesn't feel sensible, or that feels too robotic. For example, when even the most trusting, adventurous of passengers deduces that there's no one behind the steering wheel – or behind the algorithm – of a driverless car, they won't get in!

Deep learning is where companies at the forefront of innovation can literally lose customers. It's also where they can make great technological advances. Ah, there lies the conundrum. Net-net: AI without human management is an example of a gray area where more attention to good service design could be helpful.

People want to be knowledgeable.

Companies that help their customers become, or at least seem, smarter are poised for growth. For example, a California charter school district, Summit Public Schools, is franchising its personalized learning platform in order to boost performance and increase "knowledge sharing" nationwide. Summit students learn via a combination of online and in-class instruction, working collaboratively as well as individually. The beauty of the system is that the technology professes to succeed only if the teacher is on board with the program. No human, no success.

One school road-testing the personalized learning approach reported parental concern about teachers "parking children in front of screens." This presented a perfect teaching moment for Summit. The way in which a product is managed and interacted with by its users – in this case, the parents and the teachers – can make or break its ability to go viral. Summit seems to be weathering its growing pains by forging ahead with its innovative learning platform while supporting the emotional concerns of the parents. So what's the service design grade for Summit? So far, it's an A.

YouTube, on the other hand, should get a C- for its recent algorithmic reconfiguration that left many creators in the lurch, including independent radio show host David Pakman, who is now scrambling for ad funding to keep his popular grassroots programming on the air.

Like deep learning, this could be perceived as a "Big Brother," more negative side of AI, a side that questions First Amendment rights. Who decides what topics get advertising support and which don't? YouTube (aka Google)? Maybe. And perhaps all would have been okay if the tech giant had anticipated the fallout of its decisions and attended to its users. If companies remember that the driver of any online experience is a human being who wants to be enhanced or improved in some way – whether that is becoming more politically savvy by listening to Pakman or more test-savvy by attending a Summit Basecamp – then they'll always get an A+.

People want to love their product.

The good news is that once you hook someone, it's easy to keep them coming back for more. As long as a company reliably churns out cutting-edge and lovely products with seamless service ecosystems, said company can almost own a category. Apple is exemplary in this sense. They almost never forget their users and when they do, they try to remedy the situation as swiftly and expertly as possible. Yes, there's competition in their marketplace, but for the most part, Apple people are brand loyalists. They know the company will continue evolving, innovating, and attending to their needs. In this regard, Apple keeps an eye on the relationship they have with their human consumers while invisibly integrating the bot side of the UX.

But what happens when a brand lets its users down? Similar to the AI example above, which demonstrates how deep learning needs human monitoring to provide users the security and reliability they expect from the brands they love, Facebook got more questions of morality and responsibility than "likes" when it came to the Cleveland, Ohio murder footage.

So, while AI, AR, and VR are essential to the technological advancement of product design and development, we can't forget that a "human touch" must be behind, or at least somewhat present, in a brand's relationship with its clients. Even low-touch humans want to feel important, valued by, and trusting of the companies whose products or experiences they opt into. Winning brands understand that a well-thought-out approach to service design is critical to creating products that customers rely on to improve and/or simplify their lives. The bar continues to rise as bot-brains become ubiquitous. Like the Wizard of Oz, we need to keep human involvement behind the curtain of innovation and brand evolution. ////

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