



The Human Side of Digital Customer Engagement

EBOOK

In an omnichannel world where the lines between in-store and online shopping blur and customer expectations continue to climb, retailers are searching for new ways to create authentic, enduring customer connections. AI and other technologies are evolving at a break-neck pace, but they will never satisfy consumers' craving for human interaction along their buying journey.

According to [PWC](#), "People engage with apps, self-service checkouts, websites and the like. **But the second something goes wrong, they want to talk to a person, stat.** Only 3% of U.S. consumers, for instance, want their experiences to be as automated as possible."

The rewards for brands that are willing to respond to customers' emotional needs are undeniable. Harvard Business Review [research](#) found that "... consumers who are emotionally connected with a brand are anywhere from 25% to 100% more valuable in terms of revenue and profitability than those who are 'merely' highly satisfied with it."



SOURCE: iAdvize

Many retailers and brands are missing the mark, however, risking customers and revenue. According to [research](#) from iAdvize, shoppers feel they aren't getting the support they expect from brands and retailers during their purchasing journey. The findings also revealed that, despite technological advances in retail, consumers covet human interaction, and their preferred solution is to blend the speed and efficiency of automation with the reassurance of human knowledge, experience, and skill.

Although technology is accelerating rapidly, it simply lacks the ability to create the personal connection with customers that's essential to guiding them to a confident decision. Those decisions can deliver lasting moments of value and a long, loyal relationship with you. And those brands and retailers who ignore or compromise the human component essential to their customers' buying journey will lose.



...pure technological solutions can never
stoke the emotional connection between
employee and customer...

– McKinsey & Co.

Digital Customer Engagement: The Human Element

Chatbots will never satisfy customers' human need for connection. They often give the illusion of assistance, leaving most consumers more frustrated than when they reached out and feeling that AI is just not as complete, helpful, knowledgeable, or empathetic as a human. Customers struggle to have productive interactions with bots, and bots struggle to drive meaningful connections between customers and brands.

According to iAdvize, consumers experience a variety of rational and emotional anxieties during the critical moments immediately before a potential sale. These anxieties are usually triggered by a range of factors, including cost, value, suitability, available alternatives, and how other people will view the purchase. There is also the so-called 'paradox of choice'—the concept that too many options can cause a consumer psychological distress.

Even the most sophisticated chatbot cannot relate or respond authentically to the feelings and emotions customers inevitably experience as they look to buy. Furthermore, when it comes to an online shopping experience, iAdvize also found that retailers are losing many customers with high intent to purchase because they fail to get the support they needed while shopping and are sure to bounce to someone who gives it to them.

When it comes to the in-store shopping experience, the most frustrating issues customers face are not being able to get their questions answered, finding help when they need it, or having to rely on a non-human who lacks authenticity and empathy to deliver the all-important moments of truth, those few interactions when customers invest a high amount of emotional energy in the outcome.

Why would you trust those precious moments to a chatbot when there's something more effective and HUMAN available?

55% of shoppers say they have abandoned a purchase because they 'didn't feel comfortable about a purchase'.

SOURCE: iAdvize





Smart organizations, rather than continuing to automate their services at all costs, would be wise to understand the ways that human presence creates value in the mind of consumers.

– Adam Waytz,
[Harvard Business Review](#)

What is Virtual Brand Engagement?

In the land between in-store associates and chatbots lies a strategy brands and retailers can deploy not only to provide a heightened, nuanced customer experience but to streamline store operations. It's called virtual brand engagement, and it can make customers feel like they're in your store or interacting with your brand without actually being there. MarketSource's virtual brand engagement solution is called AskMe®, and it's brought our clients close to their customers in new ways they hadn't thought possible.

AskMe is an omnichannel experience that can help you bridge your customer experience gap in ways that can mean the difference between a satisfied customer who sings your praises and a frustrated buyer who is sure never to darken your door again. **It can also mean the difference between high associate turnover and a stable, optimized staff.** All of which can make or break your sales goals.

AskMe can help brands and retailers:



Connect directly with customers by making a live human available to them whenever, wherever, and however they want to shop



Elevate their customers' experience by meeting their nuanced needs in ways technology alone cannot



Tell their brand story in a trusted way



Foster trust with customers by guiding them to confident, comfortable buying decisions



Boost sales by giving ready-to-buy customers the in-the-moment information they need to make decisions and convert



Accelerate revenue by holding on to high-intent customers that otherwise would abandon them



Retain customers by providing a personalized, responsive, supportive, frictionless buying experience



AskMe® gives brands and retailers a way to bring a dedicated team of human brand experts to their customers—whether in-store or online—through their devices, which they already rely on while they shop.

AskMe reps are not just agents—they are savvy brand experts who receive intense, ongoing training from our Learning, Training, and Development team and from our in-house retail sales experts on each brand and product they represent. Behind every AskMe rep is a team of retail sales specialists and strategists and sales-changing technologies, configured to optimize results for our clients.

A virtual brand engagement strategy has the potential to accelerate your sales while enhancing your customers' experience. When customers interact with an AskMe brand expert, our clients experience a 19% higher conversion rate and a 6x return on investment. AskMe also allows you to reduce headcount without compromising your level of service. And we can implement AskMe in your environment, integrated with your systems, within a matter of weeks.

When customers interact
with an AskMe brand expert,
our clients experience:

19%

Higher Conversion Rate

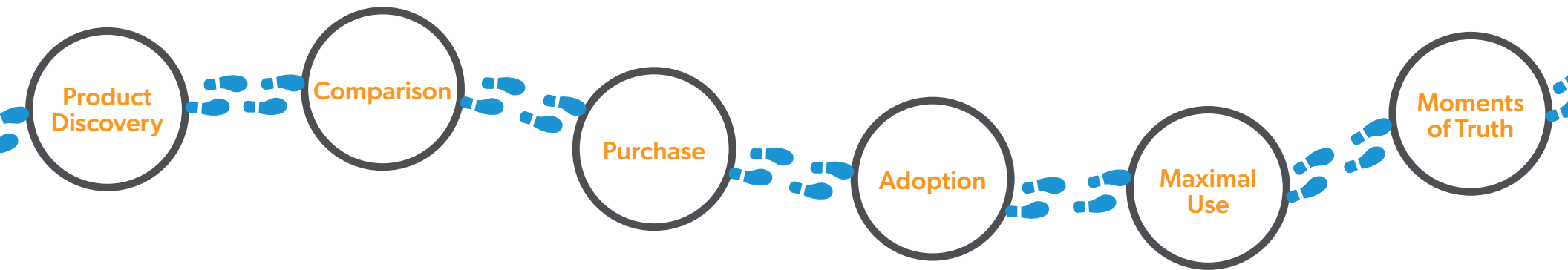
6X

Return on Investment

Re-Imagine the Customer Experience

Brands and retailers wanting to leverage the latest strategies and provide premium customer experiences must re-imagine the customer experience. While technology is a key element in this transition, it's not a panacea for delivering the kinds of experiences customers are looking for.

Rather, brands and retailers should deploy a holistic, digital engagement strategy that accompanies customers along every stage of their buying journey—from product discovery to living with and maximizing the product once it belongs to them. **It empowers your customers to make better, informed buying decisions and have the product and/or brand experience nirvana you want them to.**



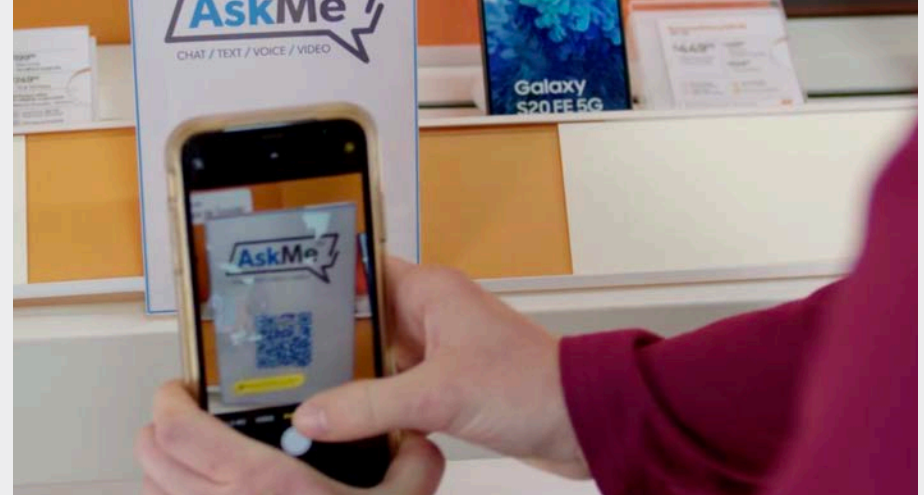
While customers access brand experts digitally, unlike chatbots or other AI technologies, AskMe connects customers to actual humans who can make them feel heard, sympathize with their dilemmas, respond to their needs and preferences, and guide them to a confident purchase.

Providing this level of customized service takes advantage of technology to link customers to a live product expert. An in-store retail associate connects the customer directly with a virtual brand expert, either through the customer's own mobile device or an in-store device. This initiates an immediate, one-on-one interaction between the customer and the AskMe rep, via a text chat or voice or video call. Then, a live conversation can begin! It's simple and seamless.

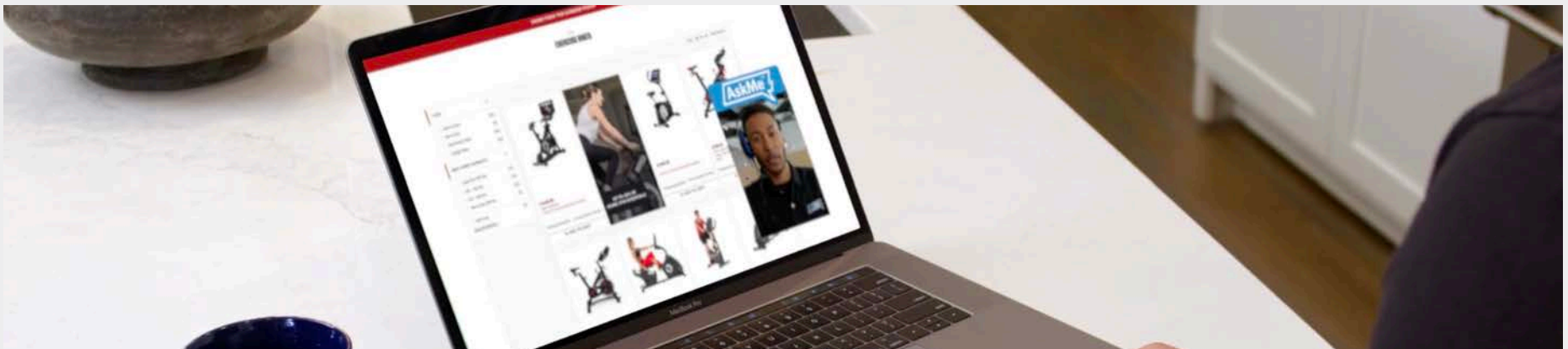
Another way the in-store shopper may instantly connect to a virtual brand expert is by scanning a QR code on a shelf or the product itself with their mobile device. Again, the interaction can proceed via text messaging, voice, or video.



Associate makes the connection using an in-store device to get an immediate answer to a specific customer question or to ask about a new product feature they haven't been trained on.



Customer uses own device to open a video chat to ask about and compare product features.



Customer scans QR code on an empty shelf to find out if more of the item they want is in stock.

The Power of Human Digital Engagement

AskMe® brand experts can fill the gap left by store associates who are otherwise engaged or can't be up to speed on every product nuance. Brand experts can do everything from answer detailed product questions, to help customers compare products, to offer product recommendations and warranty information, to help customers complete their purchase, and to provide post-purchase support to customers once they get the product home.

AskMe brand experts have deep brand and product knowledge, and by helping customers understand product features and differences among competing products, assist them in selecting the product that fits their needs. He or she may also be able to help the customer complete the purchase and confirm delivery options. If the customer decides to purchase a product that is not currently on the shelf, the brand expert may be able to locate it in another store or online and then have it shipped or scheduled for pickup or delivery.



Unlike chatbots or other AI solutions, brand experts understand your brand's values, your brand's stance on relevant social and sustainability issues, and the features that differentiate your products from those of your competitors. This puts them in a unique position to empathize with and react authentically to your customers' nuanced emotional needs and to guide them to a confident purchase decision. Brand experts can even up-sell and cross-sell and complete transactions instantaneously. Even if the interaction doesn't result in an immediate purchase, the customer comes away with a more trusted, personal relationship with your brand.

Connect with Customers Where They Are

Placing enough brand reps in stores to answer customer questions, conduct demos, or otherwise accommodate customers' needs, would strain most staffing budgets. Alternatively, a virtual brand expert can provide a high level of service to a multitude of customers across a geographic region—even the entire nation. It doesn't matter whether you have five or five thousand stores: virtual brand experts are ready to serve your customers—wherever they are.

The result? A higher level of efficiency in serving customers at scale. Virtual teams can deliver more frequent coverage, across more stores, and do it more consistently than in-person reps who are making rounds to multiple stores every few days. Because they are available to assist customers at any store—whether a high-volume location or a less busy, smaller location—virtual brand experts assure every customer receives the same quality customer experience, wherever and whenever they need it.

Surveys show that online shoppers yearn to see products in person and interact with someone who can give them confidence in their purchasing decision. A virtual brand expert creates an all-important live interaction. And that one-on-one connection can lead to greater customer satisfaction than merely reading lengthy text descriptions online.

After the sale, the virtual brand specialist can assist customers with installation, activation, and more to ensure product adoption and satisfaction. A virtual brand expert can also prevent losing sales to competitors. A virtual brand expert is able to overcome buyer uncertainty by revealing nuanced product features and how they compare with competing products. Customers who are comparing different product versions, color, or sizes—both within the same line or with other brands—appreciate the added value of having a product expert share more detailed knowledge of the differences.



And a virtual brand expert can build consumer confidence. Accessing a brand specialist virtually offers customers the opportunity to see a product in action, to view it from all angles, or to see different versions or colors of the same item. Customers come away with a definitive understanding of the product and the brand and the assurance of making the right purchase.

A virtual brand expert overcomes understaffed retail associate teams to meet customers where they are:

Omnichannel

More than 90% of shoppers combine digital and physical channels on the path to purchase.

90%

Mobile

The majority of consumers use smartphones when shopping brick-and-mortar stores (60.1%) and when browsing e-commerce sites (71.6%).

60.1%

71.6%

Accessibility

96% of shoppers have left stores empty handed because they couldn't find what they needed or lines were too long.

96%

SOURCE: iVend Retail's Global Path to Purchase Report

Retail associates have more responsibilities than ever before. Compounded by persistent labor shortages, they are busy performing routine tasks such as restocking shelves, cleaning and sanitizing spaces, and directing customers to product departments. They are also responsible for selling merchandise, but in many stores, that is not their focus, and they often have neither the time nor the depth of brand knowledge necessary to completely satisfy every customer.

When a retail associate can guide a customer to a virtual source of comprehensive product information, the customer is well-served, while the associate is freed to perform other duties.

The possibilities for AskMe brand experts to boost your sales and customers' experience are endless. And you don't have to choose between human and digital customer engagement to realize them.



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MarketSource, an Allegis Group company, is a sales acceleration company focused on delivering better outcomes for many of the world's most iconic brands. We design and operationalize managed sales and customer experience solutions in B2B and retail environments. Our solutions are purpose-built and tech-enabled to deliver measurable improvements in business outcomes.