



As Travel Begins Its Rebound, Conversational AI Can Improve the Customer Experience

The travel and hospitality sector — certainly one of the hardest hit industries during the pandemic — is seeing demand return in certain areas.

Domestic leisure travel is recovering, with the U.S. hotel industry achieving nearly 70 percent occupancy rates¹ in July 2021, which was the highest rate since August 2019.

However, business travel remains starkly reduced with some experts believing that a return to pre-pandemic levels of spending will not likely return until 2024². In fact, many are debating whether business travel will recover at all given

the success of virtual meetings and other non-travel alternatives. Companies are having second thoughts³ about what type of travel is necessary given the substantial cost savings as well as reduction in carbon footprint enterprises have experienced over the past 18 months.

With vacation travel driving the majority of the recovery in the near term, companies in this sector must now focus more than ever on

¹ [“STR: U.S. Hotel Performance for July 2021,”](#) STR, August 2021

² [“Covid Hit the Hotel Industry Hard. Data Shows It’s Still Missing a Key Part of Its Business,”](#) Jared Mandell, NBC News, September 2021

³ [“Forever Changed’: CEOs Are Dooming Business Travel — Maybe for Good,”](#) Bloomberg, August 2021

regaining consumer trust and loyalty. To seize the opportunities coming from pent-up demand, travel and hospitality brands need to adapt to the new needs, wants, and behaviors of travel consumers.

From contactless services such as payments and digital room keys to more outdoor activities, to being assured that trips can be changed or cancelled without losing money, wooing today's traveler will require a focus on optimizing the customer journey, eliminating friction, and personalizing the experience before, during, and after travel. That's where conversational artificial intelligence (AI) and automation can help.

Hotels Lead the Recovery

The hotel industry has rebounded from the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic. U.S. hotel occupancy returned to pre-pandemic levels, with a 69.6% occupancy rate in July 2021, the highest rate since August 2019.

However, industry experts say it's still missing a vital part of its business: corporate travelers.

Source: "[COVID Hit the Hotel Industry Hard. Data Shows It's Still Missing a Key Part of Its Business](#)," Jared Mandell, NBC News, September 2021

Creating a Seamless, Personalized Traveler Experience

Digital transformation accelerated across nearly every industry during the pandemic. The travel and hospitality sector was no exception. Adopting digital touchpoints and services became a top priority versus a nice-to-have offering. Consumers that moved from in-person to online aren't likely to return to old habits, meaning that expectations are higher than ever for a great user experience while shopping for, booking, and changing travel plans online.

However, when travelers are confronted with issues such as unexpected delays or cancellations, they often want assistance from fellow humans. They want and expect a personalized, empathetic experience with customer service, including interacting with agents who understand the issue and can quickly help resolve it. Alleviating the hassles and headaches of travel so they can get to their relaxing vacation experiences faster is what will rebuild guest and traveler loyalty.

Optimizing the travel customer experience starts by understanding and optimizing every conversation before, during, and after an agent/traveler interaction — from self-service to agent assistance to after-call follow-up and fulfilling promises made during the call. A conversational automation platform powered by conversational AI, machine learning, and automation technology can understand and optimize every conversation with travelers and agents, regardless of the channel.

Long Wait Times

A Uniphore survey of U.S. consumers shows that hold times increased by 50% since March 2020, with more than half (53%) of consumers waiting more than 30 minutes to get a response.

Optimizing and Automating the Conversation Using AI

Conversational AI is a set of advanced technologies that recognizes and comprehends human language and uses this understanding to optimize, automate, and analyze conversations in and across multiple channels. With a conversational automation platform powered by AI, travel and hospitality contact centers can use machines to automate conversations and augment agents to achieve the type of transformational results that

drive excellent customer experiences, high Net Promoter Scores (NPSs), superb traveler/guest satisfaction ratings, and greater revenue.



Conversational Self-Service:

Automate common, repetitive inquiries with personalized self-

service via an omnichannel intelligent virtual assistant (IVA), supporting voice, web, and mobile channels, to offload interactions while accelerating resolution. An IVA with conversational AI passes the context from your IVA to the contact center to create a frictionless interaction for travelers who need further assistance.



In-Call Guidance:

Conversational AI optimizes every conversation by enabling agents to be

more productive and empathetic while personalizing the experience for customers. By using conversational AI to understand the customer's real intent and sentiment, you can help your agents deliver a more conversational experience while resolving traveler issues faster.



Automated After-Call Work:

The time spent in after-call work (ACW) — including categorizing and

summarizing the call, updating systems, and taking follow-up actions — impacts average handle time, call waiting times, customer satisfaction, costs, agent productivity, and agent satisfaction. Automating ACW improves accuracy and productivity as well as enhances the customer's and the agent's experience.



Automated Promises Management:

A promise made that is not kept or tasks that are not performed

correctly can quickly negate the positive effects of a good conversational experience. A conversational automation platform can automatically recognize, log, and enrich

promises. After the call, it sends the customer a summary of the promises made to align expectations and then automatically manages the fulfillment of the promises, which improves NPS, reduces repeat calls, and improves processing time.



Post-Interaction Analytics:

Automate post-call analytics on 100% of contact center

conversations to gain deep insight into trends and opportunities for improving customer satisfaction and operational efficiency as well as sales effectiveness. Understand how travelers are using channels such as self-service as well as identify potential points of friction in the customer journey to optimize the customer experience. Automatically monitor and score quality and provide feedback to agents and supervisors to drive performance improvements.

Delivering Personalization at Scale with Conversational Self-Service

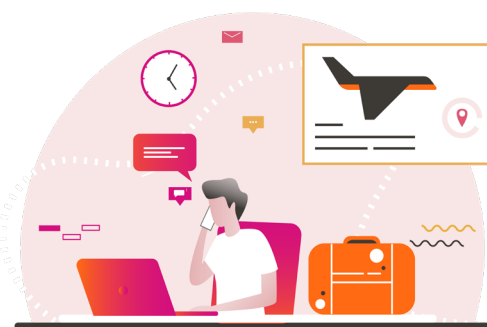
Conversational AI for traveler self-service helps brands strengthen engagement with customers and improve satisfaction for routine interactions before, during, and after the trip — while reducing volume in the contact center by 15 percent or more.

Before the trip, an IVA interacts with travelers to help them book their travel. For example, a customer can call to make a reservation and interact with a voicebot IVA. Using natural language understanding (NLU) technologies eliminates friction in the reservation process to enable travelers to easily complete the booking. Seamlessly connected with the reservation and CRM systems, the IVA simplifies the transaction by automatically confirming the details required to book the travel and uses the customer's previous travel history to make personalized upsell offers.



Before the trip

Intelligent Virtual Assistant (IVA)



After the trip



During the trip

During the trip, the IVA supports guests with services during their travel such as booking a reservation at a restaurant. Using geo-based alerts, the IVA proactively greets the customer upon arrival and presents an offer connected with past interactions at the destination. The guest is supported throughout the trip with proactive alerts based on location and can also make requests such as scheduling a late checkout. Routine requests are quickly handled so staff can focus on more high-touch interactions to drive superior guest experiences and engagement.

After the trip, the IVA proactively engages customers, for example to book their next trip or complete a survey.

Conclusion

Using conversational AI to optimize, analyze, and automate every conversation is the foundation for travel and hospitality brands to transform the traveler and agent experience, drive customer satisfaction, and generate greater loyalty and revenue as travel demand continues to rebound.

The right conversational automation platform that addresses the entire customer conversation from self-service to post-interaction analytics can help your company deliver a positive, personalized, and frictionless experience for your customers.

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