

White Paper

The top traits of intelligent Virtual Assistants

Synopsis

The benefits of intelligent Virtual Assistants are clear – improve your online customer service experience and increase sales. But what character would suit your business best? Male or female? Young or old? Business dress or casual?

Humanlike virtual assistants allow people and websites to engage in intelligent conversation over any interactive channel and in multiple languages, their digital nature allowing them to adopt any physical appearance and personality. To discover what consumers expect from a Virtual Assistant, Artificial Solutions commissioned independent research, examining the preferences of 1,500 consumers across Europe.

The results provide a fascinating insight into the attributes consumers are looking for in a Virtual Assistant when interacting online. This white paper is designed to help brands decide what type of Virtual Assistant will work best for them. [READ ON...](#)

Characteristics of a Virtual Assistant

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Creating a face that fits

Online Virtual Assistants are becoming more widespread and consumer appetite for them is growing, as highlighted by an independent survey of 1,500 consumers across Europe.

Results showed that 81% of people said they would be more likely to engage with an online Virtual Assistant if it improved their online experience, 72% welcomed them becoming part of every website and a similar number said they would spend longer on a website that had one.

Virtual assistants can take on multiple roles on a website, such as answering customer questions, performing various helpful tasks and connecting to enterprise systems when needed. Their intelligence allows them to remember facts, learn from their conversations and maintain a two-way dialogue with visitors but what other characteristics should they have?

Conducted by market research experts Axiall, the research study¹ also examined how important a range of criteria are when creating a virtual assistant including age, gender and appearance. Results showed that the type of character consumers preferred was most likely to be between 35-44 years old, male or female, dressed appropriately for the brand in question, animated, attractive and have a sense of humor.

Reflecting real-world communication best practice, Virtual Assistants need to be knowledgeable, fit in with their industry surroundings, but also be able to demonstrate a high level of emotional intelligence and empathy through gestures and expressions, not just their language. A subtle sense of humor also goes a long way in helping characters to be friendly and approachable, but only when appropriate for the situation at hand.

Every requirement for a Virtual Assistant is different and this is where their beauty lies – each character is unique. All of the character traits mentioned above combine to give a Virtual Assistant his or her distinct personality, reflecting the culture and values of a brand. And by using the right blend of attributes, customers become more engaged with the character and their customer service experience is improved.

Here we take a look at the research findings in more detail and the success factors in creating the right character.

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The voice of experience

The optimal perceived age for a Virtual Assistant is between 35-44 years old. The survey found that age does not matter to most people but younger consumers are more likely to want to see an older character and vice versa for an older audience. Young people expect to interact with a character that is 'knowledgeable and helpful', while the more mature audience does not want themselves reflected back at them but still want someone who appears knowledgeable.

Male or female?

Consumers were also asked about their preferred gender for a Virtual Assistant, with 85% saying gender does not matter to them, although men are slightly more likely than women to want to interact with another male character.

Dressed for the occasion

When asked whether a Virtual Assistant should be dressed in business or casual attire, 48% stated that it did not matter while 35% said they should be dressed suitably for the website or situation - for example a Virtual Assistant for a bank would be dressed very differently to a healthcare provider or entertainment organization. Only 11% distinctly prefer the idea of business dress and in terms of age differences, younger people prefer business attire. Again, this is somewhat at odds with commonly-held assumptions.

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Look who's talking

Respondents were also quizzed on the style of speech and whether a Virtual Assistant should use a formal business tone or a casual and colloquial style. Over half said the style should be suitable for the website or the occasion. Interestingly (and unlike the responses around dress or age of the Virtual Assistant) there was no appreciable difference by age of respondent.

Express yourself

Some Virtual Assistants have animated body movement along with moving eyes and facial expressions. When asked if an online Virtual Assistant should move in an animated humanlike way or remain static, 59% of consumers said it does not matter, 30% wanted animation and 11% preferred static. The younger the respondent, the more likely they are to want an animated character.

Easy on the eye

Four times as many men compared to women prefer Virtual Assistants to be attractive. Younger people are more likely to prefer them to be attractive than plain and all age groups would rather they were 'easy on the eye'.

Service with a smile

When asked about the type of sense of humor an online Virtual Assistant should have, the biggest preference was 'a little humor would make them more customer friendly'.

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Conclusion

While many of the findings are unsurprising, having statistics based on material facts is a useful cross-check for any organization contemplating a Virtual Assistant. Whilst the overall results may not be shocking in their nature, a number of interesting results were noted, such as the propensity of younger respondents to prefer an older Virtual Assistant (and vice versa); and the question of attire. While few respondents would expect a bank's Virtual Assistant to appear dressed in jeans and t-shirt, it is clear that the online world is more tolerant and relaxed about strict dress codes.

These results indicate that the Virtual Assistants enjoy a warm reception, with more leeway given to their physical appearance and style than one would initially imagine. Although it is clearly important to project a friendly and welcoming Virtual Assistant, organizations must not forget that s/he is a de facto employee and must be treated as such to ensure the visual and psychological link is maintained.

It is clear from the survey results that Virtual Assistants have an essential part to play in online customer service, and are here to stay. All that remains is for their employers to ensure they hire the best applicant for the job!

¹ Axiall Limited, independent specialists in business development intelligence, were commissioned to design, manage and deliver the research program. The research was overseen and verified by Leslie Sopp, Research Director at Axiall and previously Director of Market Research for Which Magazine.

Axiall conducted an online European survey using available online research panels in each country. Panel members and survey respondents were 18 and over and represent the views of a cross-section of users.

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About Artificial Solutions

Artificial Solutions develops and implements software-as-a-service based virtual assistants that allow intelligent conversations between people and computers to be held in 21 different languages across multiple channels including the web, mobile (smart phone), SMS, email, social networks and live-chat. Utilizing its natural language interaction technology, Artificial Solutions helps organizations improve customer experience and reduce the cost of online queries. With its development centre in Stockholm, its employees represent 30 nationalities in offices in Sweden, Spain, UK, Italy, France, Slovenia, Germany, Denmark, Japan and the Netherlands. For more information, visit www.artificial-solutions.com
