

Debunking digital marketing trends

The no nonsense guide
to what you need (and what you don't)

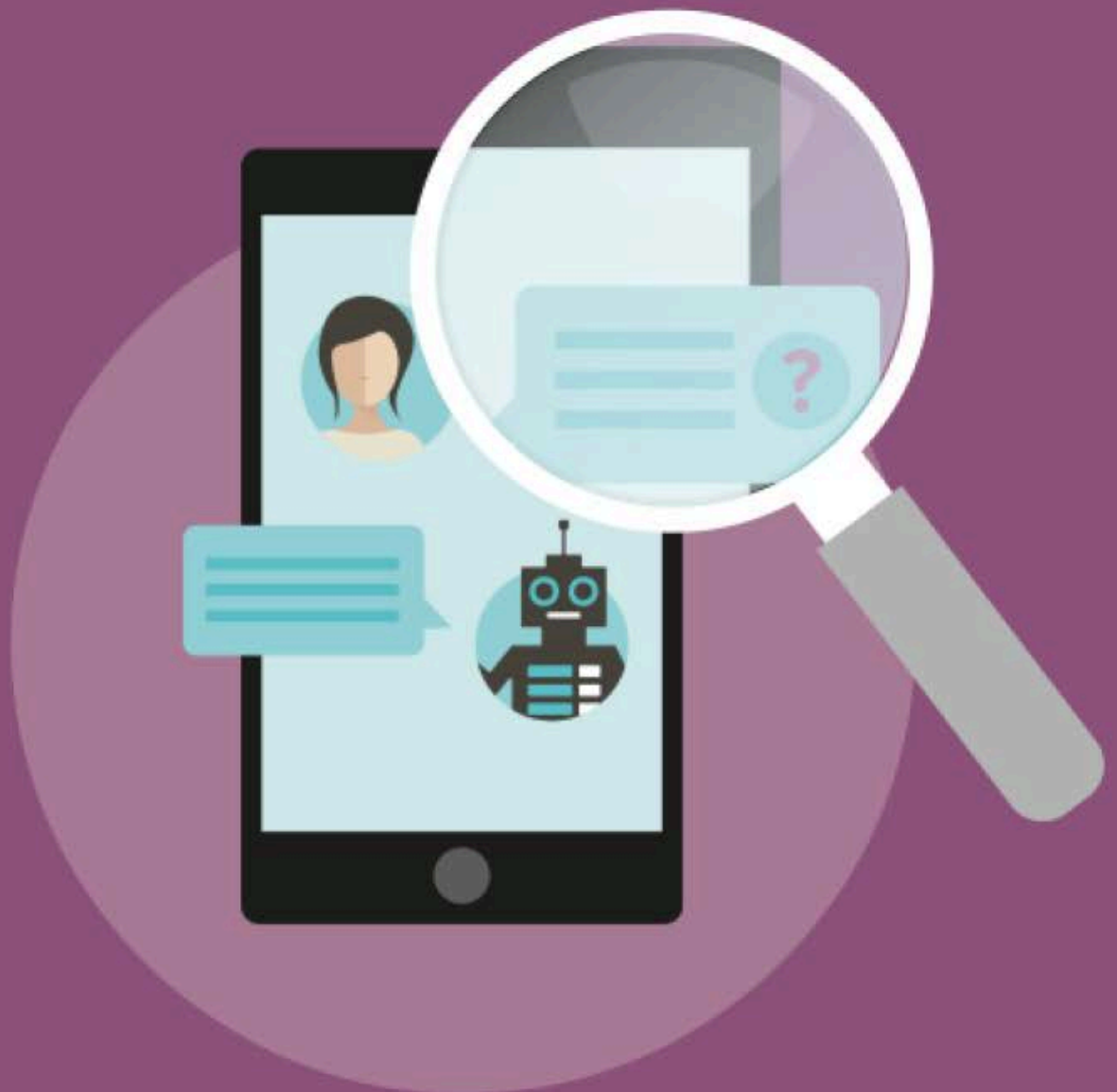


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What you'll get from this guide

With every passing year there's a new marketing trend destined to change the world: AI, VR, programmatic – you name it, you'll have seen a study telling you how many 'top marketers' are already all over it.

Each new tactic spawns dozens of new terms, buzzwords, and jargon. These can lead to confusing value propositions that make little sense, such as “growth hack social for a synergistic brand message empowering your brand” (OK, so maybe that's a *slight* exaggeration).

The truth is that jumping on new digital trends, rather than being a silver bullet, can be seriously detrimental to your efforts if chosen poorly. With finite resource and energy, choosing to pursue a new tactic is a huge investment that can detract from what's really important – so it's vital that you can quickly sort through what's right for you and what isn't.

So how do you wade through the stats, the buzzwords and sales-driven whitepapers to know what to invest in?

This guide is here to help you see the wood for the trees.

In other words, we're going to look at some of the latest digital marketing trends and see whether they are worth your time. Everything from AI to personalisation is about to get a fresh new critical eye.

How to judge a new digital trend

The marketing world is almost at critical mass for buzzword phrases, surface-level tactics, and sometimes questionable features. And there seems to be no sign of it slowing down.

In the last year alone we've seen the incredible rise of Facebook Messenger, a stronger focus on AI, growing talk of VR, a [continuation of the conversation surrounding wearables](#) – all amongst countless other smaller developments.

Some might prove to be useful to your brand, but often, these new buzzwords serve as little more than distractions. The question smart marketers need to ask is:

“Are these new tactics actually going to assist my brand, or are they just going to be a distraction that detracts from the core work I’m trying to do?”

Despite what many thought-leaders may tell you, your marketing strategy need not be complicated. It should, in fact, be incredibly simple: understand your audience well, then have a strategy to create and deliver the right message to them consistently and effectively.

This isn't new information for any savvy brand. But it does bring into question how we judge the value of these new tactics and the concept of best practices.

The actions you take have to be tailored specifically to your audience. You have to focus on your brand, your audience, and their needs.

Whatever you do – whether it's incorporate machine learning or simply get stuck into email marketing – your customer has to be at the heart of your decision. Lose sight of your customer and that's when your strategy ceases to be coherent and starts to look more like a series of tactical executions.

Sadly, that means that there's no catch-all silver bullet able to solve every brand's growth problems.

AI companies, chatbot brands, and various influencers will be the first to tell you how 'one simple trick' brought them a 300% increase in revenue. What they fail to tell you is how the change that brought them a 300% increase made up only 5% of a wider strategy, built on a solid customer-focused foundation.

When it comes to assessing new marketing trends, it's not so much about scepticism as putting your customer first and having a coherent strategy to serve them. Keeping a laser-focus on your audience will help you zone out on potentially destructive distractions, as well as recognise good ideas when you see them.

The next few chapters will zero in on a few of the more prominent recent marketing trends and see how this thinking can apply to them.

Artificial Intelligence

Right now, the hottest marketing trend is automation.

Products and services that take the boring tasks out of our hands, freeing up more time for us to focus on building a better business.

Of course, the coverage is breathless. On the one hand, AI is sold as a revolutionary solution to humanity's plethora of productivity problems. On the other, the fear that one day [AI will be sophisticated enough to take over the globe](#), making humans obsolete.

But what about marketing? Before you rush to make half your team redundant in favour of C-3PO, let's take a step back and think about what AI is actually useful for.

As we've written before, machine learning is great for the [taking the heavy-lifting out of getting granular](#). It means that rather than have hundreds of rules to account for every eventuality of a customer journey, you can have the machine do that for you.

The potential for the martech industry is amazing. The ability to take on decision-making has seen AI make [social media platforms serve more relevant content](#), make pricing dynamic and transforming how ad-buying works. Of course, there's also chatbots (more on that later).

But what about *your* strategy – where does AI fit into the picture? You have three key considerations here.

Firstly, in order to have a computer make thousands of complex decisions on your behalf, you're going to need to give it a lot of good, clean data to work with. From our experience, we're yet to meet a marketer who's satisfied that their data looks exactly how they want it to. When it comes to AI, the machine's only going to work if you feed it a good diet – if you're not there yet, you're

not ready for AI.

For example, one of the key areas of potential for AI in marketing is in automating the segmentation process while another is in delivering product recommendations off the back of that – but how good will those decisions be if you're not collecting the right data to start with?

The second is a little more nuanced: while AI can help take automate and predict, it's best doing that on a micro level. You still need to make the big macro decisions that drive the strategy – AI is there to pick up the baton when you want to hand off the prediction and personalisation on a granular scale. Once again, the choice as to whether to engage with a new marketing trend comes down to whether it's the fit for your strategy – not the other way around.

Finally, there's the question of how far a machine that sets out to make communication more personal can do so without a human at its helm (ironic, really). Here's an extreme example: in testing the capabilities of their AI program, Facebook recently shut down operations after the [AI developed a confusing lexicon of its own](#):

Bob: i can i i everything else

Alice: balls have zero to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to

Bob: you i i everything else

Alice: balls have a ball to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to me

Bob: i i can i i i everything else

Alice: balls have a ball to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to me

Bob: i

Alice: balls have zero to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to

Bob: you i i i i i everything else

Alice: balls have 0 to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to me to

Bob: you i i i everything else

The program was shut down not because of a fear of the robots taking over with their own, indecipherable language, but because they'd so completely failed at achieving their set task of communicating clearly.

As a marketer, you know that the power comes less from the medium than the message itself – and the creativity and connection behind it will always require some hard work from a human.

Sorry about that.

A further note: there's a technical consideration to this that your IT team will have plenty to say

about. It becomes increasingly difficult to [debug systems that are entirely reliant on machine learning](#). Just look at the above conversation and you can see how difficult it would be for a human to decipher.

Google, as one of the largest companies experimenting with AI, predict similar issues and have stated that they will not rely 100% on machine learning.



Dustin Woodard
@webconnoisseur

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Going all AI for Google's search algos would be a bad decision because it is very difficult to debug, says @methode #google #smx

2:47 PM - Mar 23, 2017

  7  9 



Jennifer Slegg
@jenstar

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If RankBrain makes a ranking decision, it is hard to understand why the decision was made. With traditional algo, you can. @methode #smx

2:46 PM - Mar 23, 2017

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Key Takeaway

At the end of the day, your brand's growth depends on **your** understanding of your audience.

AI is only something that you should begin to consider if you're confident that your strategy is sound and your data is fantastic, but all you want to do is to be able to take the heavy lifting out of taking it to a highly personalised level.

That's when AI can come in to help you – but it's for grunt work and heavy lifting as you get take a strategy from near-perfection to near-quantum levels of detail. Until then, you have plenty of other things to focus on.

Personalisation

Personalisation has always been a key issue within the marketing world, but what does it actually mean?

Does it refer to the use of first names in email subject lines?

The tracking of purchase history to better up-sell or cross sell new products?

Or maybe it's simply about refining your USP to better appeal to the majority of your intended target audience and their needs?

The thing is, all of the above fall within the bracket of personalisation. It's a term which is spread so thin that it's become difficult to discern any real meaning from it.

Most marketers agree the term is important. A [recent study by Conversant](#) highlighted 73% of marketers believe personalisation represents the future of marketing.

However, the respondents also couldn't agree on a single solid definition of the term – which is telling.

Many brands are making grand claims about personalised experiences despite not having a clear definition of what it means.

The truth is that there is no standard definition of 'personalisation', which leads to a huge number of vague, generic, and ultimately empty promises being made.

Promises which sound good on paper and feed the belief that personalisation is the future of

marketing, but ultimately offer little in the way of tangible actions and gains.

Personalisation is an important aspect of marketing. As tech gets better we're able to offer an increasingly individualised experience to different users – however, you should be very careful when being sold personalisation as a service.

The action of personalisation has to go beyond individual actions. It has to incorporate as much information about your users as is possible to create a more complete individual experience. The same report from Conversant offers a good overview of how personalisation should appear for different users.

PERSONALIZED ONLINE ADVERTISING CREATIVE JOURNEY BASED ON REAL-TIME RICH PROFILES

Female/Age: 39

- Income: \$130K
- Calkbrook, IL
- Married, Presence of Children
- Multichannel Shopper
- Value Shopper
- Outdoor Fitness/Yoga
- Buying for Mom
- Purchased In-Store Last Month: Jeans, Tops
- Recently Purchased Online: Sweater, Blouse

Female/Age: 28

- Income: \$85K
- Calkbrook, IL
- Single
- Redeemed Shopper Points within last 3 months
- Urban Style
- Fashionista
- Multichannel Shopper
- Recently Purchased Online: Gown, Couture Pants

CONVERSANT
The power of personal.

You can see that every ad and touchpoint is customised to the user, not simply on the campaign. As Conversant correctly asserts, personalisation is “about messages in which many aspects of communication are precisely calibrated to a user”.

Key Takeaway

Personalisation is the future of marketing, and as tech becomes more adept at tracking and collating user information we should be able to present more personalised solutions to individual users.

However, right now the term is too general. If someone's trying to sell you 'personalisation', ask them what that entails. If it's simply a case of slapping a first name in a subject line, retargeting

ads based on last product seen, or based on generic demographic data, it's not enough. Personalisation needs to incorporate as much user data to produce the closest thing to a 1:1 communication as possible.

Virtual Reality

Experience is a chief concern for the modern shopper.

Traditional business would have us all believe that cost is the primary consideration in driving sales. However, studies have shown that experience can trump cost.

A study from Retail Dive discovered [62% of consumers prefer a physical](#), in-store experience. Consumers want to touch, feel, and try items before committing to a purchase.

Experience is as much a driving force in e-commerce as bricks-and-mortar. For years there's been a heavy focus on creating a seamless cross-device experience for users and providing more high quality product images to bridge the primary tactile gap that exists between online and in-store shopping. However, at the time of writing e-commerce struggles to compete with in-store tactile experiences, and some believe that virtual reality (VR) could be the answer to this shortfall.

VR could allow shoppers to see what they look like in clothes without ever leaving their homes. It could turn living rooms, gardens, and bedrooms into showrooms for products of every kind.

It could be a game-changer for e-commerce by filling the much-missed interactive element to shopping. As important, it could also serve as the link between the offline and online shopping worlds – which any smart marketer knows is a false dichotomy as today's shopper happily engages with brands and messages in any number of channels before making a purchase decision.

However – VR (or v-commerce) is not the panacea that's about to change the world overnight.

It's [predicted that by 2020 VR headsets will be in 1% of households worldwide](#). That might seem like a promising number, but it doesn't detail the hurdles stores will face in setting up a VR

solution.

The problem is that v-commerce doesn't fill an immediate need.

It doesn't truly bridge the tactile gap that holds people back from committing to an online purchase. It simply adds another method to view a product through a digital channel, much like video once took a step up from photo.

V-commerce is exciting and compelling, but it's not a game-changer in the same vein as e-commerce, which took the shopping experience from a specific location and opened it up to people anywhere in the world. It simply adds a new, slightly more interesting method to view products.

Add to that the comparatively low user numbers and you have to wonder whether the development and implementation investment would be covered and justified by the return. Our belief is that, in the immediate future (which is not to say long-term future), that return simply isn't worth it for most brands.

Key Takeaway

It took brick-and-mortar stores too long to adopt e-commerce, and that was with an obvious, immediate need. V-commerce, on the other hand, doesn't have such an obvious need.

It may well one day develop into the staple of e-commerce transactions, but for the time being it's not much more than something to watch. Your time would be better spent on more viable methods of increasing revenue.

Wearables

We were told that we needed smartwatches to enable fitness tracking, messaging, and even shopping on-the-go. Our fridges, cars, [and even toasters](#) needed to be connected to the web to help monitor grocery levels and take the hassle out of navigation.

And largely, these ‘revolutionary’ developments have fallen short of their game-changing expectations. None more so than wearable technology, when with the launch of the Apple Watch a glut of brands and companies rushed to be first to market with a dedicated app for the new device.

Wearable tech includes everything from smartwatches and fitness trackers to GoPros and eyewear. And whilst they’re sexy and exciting developments, none appear to hold immediate promise for the e-commerce world.

Watches formed the central focus for the wearable tech revolution, and they were flawed. The small screen space made them all but useless for anything but checking statistics. Attempts to use them could often result in confusion and frustration, as demonstrated in the below video which sees a shopper accidentally purchase an xBox and then is unable to cancel the order.

Wearables have a peculiar place in the development of e-commerce, and it all comes down to their size.

They're caught in a peculiar catch-22 where they must be small to be wearable, and yet need to be larger to be functional. When you look at the other trends in marketing and advertising, wearable tech seems to be going the opposite way.

There are leaps and bounds being made to make products and experiences more accessible and enjoyable, primarily through user-friendly displays, which is where wearable tech will struggle. This might be why the number of [wearable tech sales is gradually slowing](#):

Top Five Smartwatch Vendors, Shipments, Market Share and Year-Over-Year Growth, 3Q 2016 (Units in Millions)					
Vendor	3Q16 Unit Shipments	3Q16 Market Share	3Q15 Unit Shipments	3Q15 Market Share	Year-Over-Year Growth
1. Apple	1.1	41.3%	3.9	70.2%	-71.6%
2. Garmin	0.6	20.5%	0.1	2.3%	324.2%
3. Samsung	0.4	14.4%	0.4	6.4%	9.0%
4. Lenovo	0.1	3.4%	0.3	6.2%	-73.3%
5. Pebble	0.1	3.2%	0.2	3.3%	-54.1%
Others	0.5	17.2%	0.6	11.5%	-27.2%
Total	2.7	100.0%	5.6	100.0%	-51.6%

Source: IDC Worldwide Quarterly Wearable Device Tracker, October 24, 2016

[As this BI report states](#), users want better functionality. They need smart products that make elements of their life easier. Wearable tech simply doesn't do that. All it does is offer a novel way of seeing a fraction of the information you need.

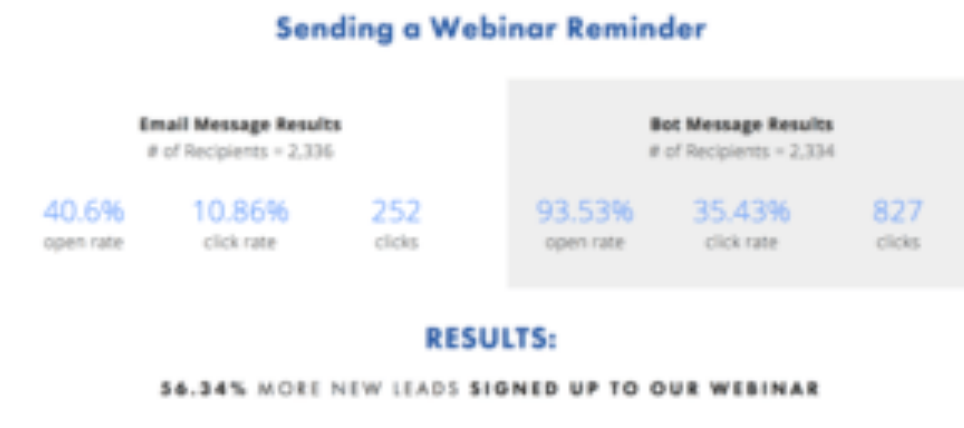
Key Takeaway

If you're thinking of optimising your site to better work on wearable devices then it's really worth asking if that's really worth it for your audience. That optimisation time could be spent looking at mobile instead, where usage is growing at an exponential rate whilst wearable use isn't.

Chatbots

Chatbots are something of a golden child in marketing right now.

Brands across the web are highlighting stats like these below from [Botsfor.business](#).



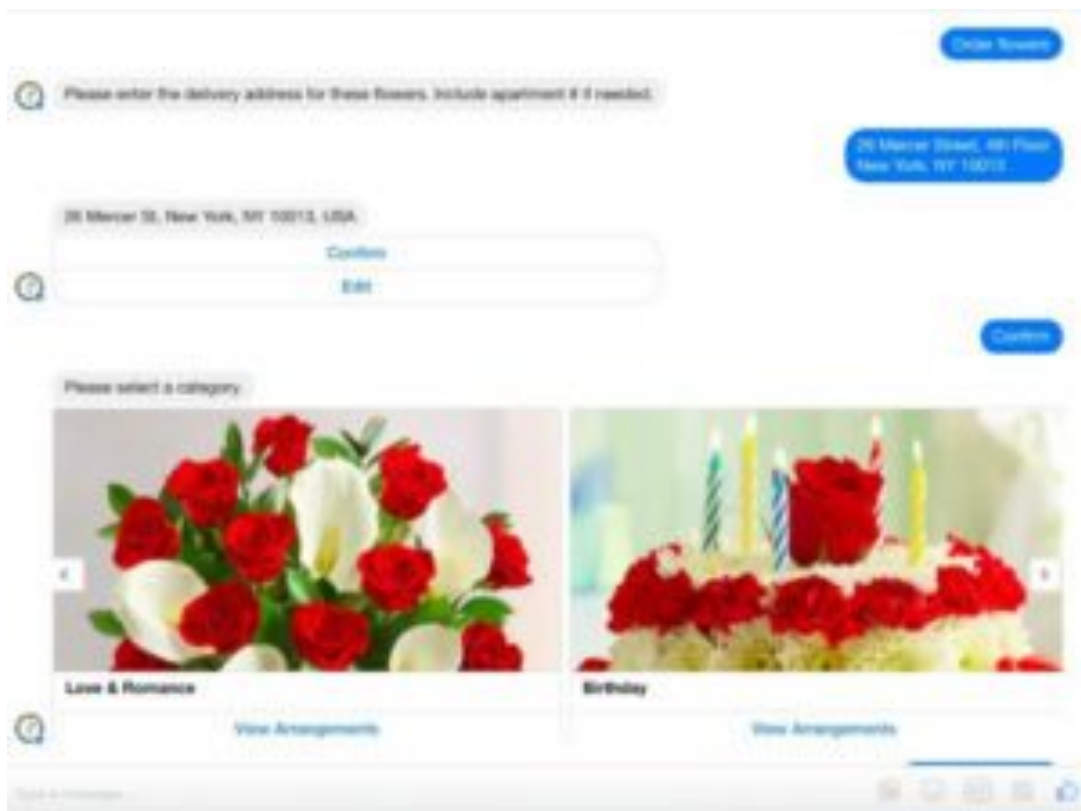
Chatbots are being hailed as the ‘email killer’. They’re being lauded as the next-greatest method for developing relationships and improving user interaction.

This is where we throw our hands up and say that honestly, there may be something to this.

Plenty of brands have been seeing great results through using Facebook Messenger chatbots. And when Facebook themselves are putting a tonne of effort into its development, it looks like it’s something that’s going to be here to stay.

Why? Messenger chatbots offer something email can’t. They often provide immediate feedback to the user, and present information in a far more conversational manner, which is key to building more genuine and long-lasting relationships.

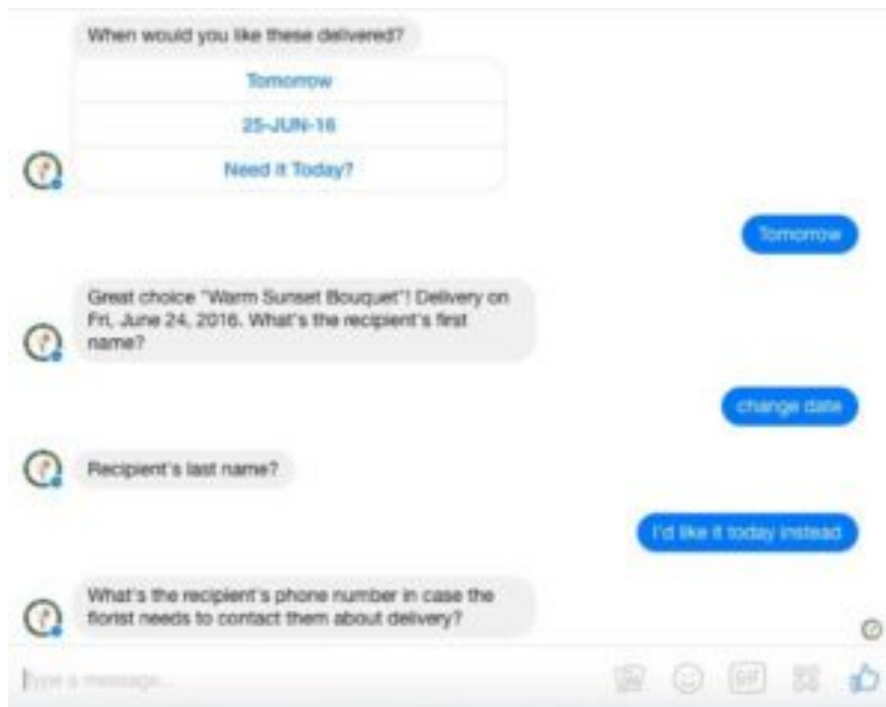
It's still early days for chatbots, but already there have been some impressive examples that have been implemented. One notable example is the below [implemented by 1800-flowers](#):



As you can see, the responses are immediate and have a more natural flow than email automation could hope to achieve. However, they're not yet perfect.

Chatbots depend upon rules set up by you, the brand. That means you either have to script a very detailed conversation flow and restrict the answers to buttons like the above, or predict every single response and question a user might send through and use the various bot services' trigger rules to then send adequate responses.

Thing is, it's going to be incredibly difficult for you to predict every question your users might ask, which could lead to awkward conversations that actually lower trust in your brand. Once again, check out what happens when you go off-script with 1800-flowers:



Key Takeaway

Chatbots hold promise and are a great way to create more human relationships with your users – though they're not yet a replacement for email, more like a welcome addition to it. Remember you don't own your messenger list: if, however unlikely, Facebook decide to end their messenger service you'll lose all those leads.



Conclusion

Whenever there's a new marketing trend doing the rounds, put your customer first when you evaluate it and make sure it's in support of your strategy, not tacked onto the side of it.

The above listed developments are all tactics. They're tools to use, but success doesn't come from jumping on the latest bandwagon – it comes from a complete strategy.

At the end of the day, you're a marketer with finite energy and finite resource, so making sure that what you're already investing is properly optimised is more important than the constant pursuit of new fixes.

What does that mean? Staying on top of the developing trends in established channels like email, SEM and PPC is key, along with getting your data and attribution house fully in order. The changes to these are faster-paced than anything you'll see in the world of VR, and they're not going anywhere anytime soon – if you want results, your attention is best directed into evolving and optimising an existing strategy.

So whenever you hear about a new, shiny, and sexy tactic or tool you have to ask yourself a couple of questions before jumping on board.

1. Is there a need and will this improve my customer's experience?
2. How will this assist and develop my existing strategy?
3. Will I have to abandon what's already working to pursue this new, potentially profitable tactic?

We're not trying to discourage you from getting excited and experimenting with new tactics – far from it. What we want to do is prevent you from scuppering your strategy by being distracted by digital marketing trends that don't necessarily serve your strategy or your customer.

Whatever stage of growth you're at, you need to focus on the core optimisation strategies at the centre of your strategy. So rather than considering new solutions as they come along, focus on really understanding and defining your problems – that way, when you adopt something new you'll know that you're making the right choice for your team and your customer.

[Book a Demo](#)

About Yieldify

Yieldify makes it easy for e-commerce businesses to deliver customer journeys that convert, through a combination of smart and simple multichannel technology and expert strategy.

Trusted by over 500 brands on more than 1,000 websites globally, Yieldify helps some of the world's innovative companies drive incremental revenue, including Marks and Spencer, French Connection, Steiner Sports, Omni Hotels and Anthropologie.

Some of our clients

GOLDSMITHS
SINCE 1778

The Fragrance Shop

M&S
EST. 1884
Kiehl's
SINCE 1851

FRENCH CONNECTION

WATCHSHOP