



Customer story: 'one' Railway

'one' Railway has significantly reduced the volume of phone calls and emails it receives from customers by employing a unique digital tool to communicate with customers.

Virtual assistants – otherwise known as Lingubots™ – are now answering in excess of 20,000 customer questions every month with a 95 per cent-plus success rate.

As a result, 'one' Railway has gained an invaluable insight into the people that use its service and how that service can be improved. Customer satisfaction has improved. Staff satisfaction has increased.

Just as importantly, 'one' Railway has realised significant cost savings and efficiencies.

Now the company is looking to use the same approach as part of its sales and marketing strategy to push new offers to customers and create a genuine dialogue with them – without the need for enormous budgets.

This is the story of how they achieved it...

The challenge

'one' Railway is one of seven train companies owned by the National Express Group. Operating out of London Liverpool Street and serving Eastern Britain, the company boasts some 105 million customers annually.

Like the rest of the rail industry, 'one' Railway faces many challenges. Legislation greatly restricts fare pricing, which means the company needs to be creative in driving revenues. Meanwhile, those self-same revenues have taken a dent in the face of 7/7 and the omnipresent terrorist threat - which in turn has affected budgets, not to mention public perception of public transport.

The company's primary touchpoint with all its customers remains its web site - which contains an astounding array of information, much of which, until very recently, remained largely unread.

The overriding task for 'one' Railway was to help build better relationships with customers based on superior service – and this meant making online information available to them as quickly and simply as possible in a 'self service' format. Just as importantly, the company wanted to really *know* its customers - and their needs - far better. What other information and services did its customers want and how could 'one' Railway provide them?

Why Ask The World?

“Originally, we were looking at some kind of advanced eFAQ function for the site but once we came across Ask The World we realised there was an opportunity to add a new dimension to the way we interact with customers online,” says 'one' Railway's applications services manager Nick Wilson.

“There is an enormous amount of information on our web site and they have enabled us to unlock it for customers, with the Lingubot acting as a navigational tool that helps users to dig down and find the answers they're looking for.”

Lingubots are virtual, interactive assistants capable of holding conversations with web users in real time, 24/7. Lingubots are unique in their ability to understand the context of questions, which in turn enables them to emulate human conversation – a feature that's unique in the world of natural language solutions.

'one' Railway's Lingubot, called Valerie answers questions about train times, delays, lost property, and station information. “Our Lingubot was originally named, Valerie, following a staff competition,” explains Wilson. “We created the character's look based on a real member of staff who we felt had the right style and look. In other words, she had to look approachable but also give people confidence in the accuracy of her answers: so we chose to put her in uniform and in a customer contact centre setting.”

Ask The World's Lingubot was the only virtual assistant that Wilson and his team looked at – which meant it was effectively competing in a 'shoot-out' against eFAQ and Search Engine technologies. The team did, however, look extensively at existing Lingubots produced for other Ask The World clients. “It was after visiting the Ikea site and having a virtual conversation with their Lingubot, Anna, that we were really persuaded of being able to create something far more engaging than the traditional methods and could make us a technology leader,” says Wilson.

How do Lingubots work?

The Lingubot's "brain" comprises a knowledge base of content that is built to anticipate customer questions and respond to them based on sophisticated word and phrase pattern matching technology.

Creating and managing this underlying knowledge base doesn't require any formal programming skills. So after the initial training from Ask The World, customers are able to build their Lingubot entirely at their own pace – which makes the solution both affordable and flexible.

"We worked very hard with Ask The World to build a knowledge base that was as comprehensive and foolproof as possible, and since then we've got the frontline staff involved with the project, helping to shape its content," says Wilson. "Subsequently, rather than feeling 'replaced' by the technology they are very positive about it. In fact, by answering a lot of the more mundane and frequently asked questions, the Lingubot is freeing them to have more value-added conversations with customers."

He admits that the biggest potential barrier to buying into the technology - at least initially - was the fact that if the Lingubot gave unsatisfactory or inconclusive answers, the technology would end up causing more harm than good.

"The fact that Lingubots are based on real language is the key," says Wilson. "The conversations with Valerie are certainly longer than with a traditional eFAQ application and more questions are asked. Of course we get the odd frivolous comment but at the same time we pick up genuinely useful feedback in a conversational tone rather than just 'clicks'."

How has the Lingubot performed?

"Ultimately, this technology has surpassed expectations, and been far more accurate than we ever thought," says Wilson. "We had a large volume of information about our stations - opening times, facilities and accessibility - that was expensive to collect and present...but was not being used. Valerie has now made this easily accessible and demonstrated there was a demand for this data."

- Valerie is answering a minimum of 20,000 customer questions (with a 95 per cent-plus success rate) every month that would otherwise be handled by a real human – either by email or telephone. Aside from the obvious customer satisfaction and experience benefits of getting fast easy answers to their questions, the cost savings and efficiencies realised through the technology has resulted in extremely fast ROI.

- ‘one’ Railway has gained invaluable insight into its customers through a variety of web analytics provided by the Lingubot – not least transcripts of every single user conversation, which are created automatically. This insight is having a direct impact on the company’s business strategy, helping to nip problems in the bud and use helpful suggestions to shape future business strategy.
- Staff satisfaction has soared because contact centre agents are having better quality, more in-depth conversations with customers.

The future

‘one’ Railway’s parent company, National Express, has now made Lingubots the preferred solution for all its operating companies.

Meanwhile, ‘one’ Railway is now looking at using Lingubots for sales as well as service - particularly for the up-selling of special offers. “We need to get these special offers – such as family away days – in front of our customers, and a Lingubot would be a really effective and inexpensive way of achieving that,” says Wilson.

“We may even introduce a different character for sales to maintain the integrity of the service we provide.”