Augmented Reality and Customer Communication

By ALYSSA MAZZINA

Over the coming five years, augmented reality (AR) will profoundly change how businesses and their customers communicate. In this post, we look at what AR means for customer communication, with a view to helping you make sure that your business is ready.

First up, what is augmented reality?

What is Augmented Reality?

Augmented reality takes live video and combines it with data to make something more useful than either would be on its own.

One popular application of augmented reality is flight tracking. Using a smartphone, many flight tracking apps let the user point the phone’s camera at a plane in the sky.

On the phone’s screen, rather than showing just the tiny dot of an aircraft, the app uses GPS, the phone’s compass, and publicly available flight data to attach a flight number to the image of the real plane.

That’s great for answering idle thoughts about where a plane is headed but what about more serious uses? And how does it apply to customer communication?
AR is the Next Step in a Rapid Evolution

Customer communication is evolving at a rapid rate. It has become conversational, rather than transactional. It takes place wherever the customer happens to be: WhatsApp, live video, SMS, voice, and more. AIs are beginning to supplement human agents and, in some cases, can handle simple queries from end to end.

Yet as businesses do more to communicate effectively with customers, so those same customers are showing an increasing preference for self-service. This is not the contradiction it might seem at first.

Omnichannel, conversational, virtual assistants, live video, over the top messaging, augmented reality, and self-service are all paths towards the same customer communication future. In that future, how customers use products and services will be part of an ongoing conversation driven by the customer interacting directly with the provider’s systems, supplemented by human help where needed. As customers interact in a more intimate and direct way with companies, AR is a channel for making otherwise abstract things — such as data — real in a person’s life.

If you’re new to AR and want to review the fundamentals, take a look at our briefing on the subject. Then come back here as we look at the role AR will play in customer communication.

Where AR Fits into Customer Communication

The key priorities of executives who have responsibility for customer communication have not changed in a long time: improve customer satisfaction, increase revenue per customer, reduce churn, reduce costs.

Let’s look at how augmented reality can help improve customer satisfaction and increase revenue.

How AR Can Improve Customer Satisfaction

Writing in the MIT Sloan Management Review, three academics identify six factors necessary to customer satisfaction:

- **Adaptability**: tailoring the offering to the specific needs and desires of the customer
- **Commitment to the customer**: resolving customer issues quickly and, crucially, in a way the customer prefers
- **Connection with other customers**: whether it’s simply the ability to leave a review or something more involved, such as a fan community, customers have shown they want to engage with other customers
- **Product assortment**: finding the sweet spot between too much choice and too little
- **Easy transactions**: removing as much friction as possible from the buying process
- **Appealing environment**: giving customers an experience that is appropriate to the brand and that leaves them feeling good about their relationship with the company.

Now, thinking of AR as a way to bring virtual things into the real world, its role in these six factors becomes clear.
Take adaptability in healthcare, for example. Imagine a physiotherapy patient who, following a shoulder operation, needs to practice certain exercises in order to regain normal movement.

An AR-enabled smartphone app could use accelerometer data to track the patient’s movements and guide them to correct their movements through prompts on the phone screen.

Taking it a step further, this could reduce visits to the physiotherapist’s office. Instead of traipsing across town with a painful shoulder, the patient could livestream video of their exercising to the physiotherapist. Arguably, it might be difficult for the physiotherapist to see the precise movements the patient is making. So, rather than rely only on video, the app could take readings from a smartwatch, or dedicated sensors, and then visualise on the physiotherapist’s app where the patient is going wrong. Not only would the patient then have video to watch later but the physio could coach the patient in real time.

AR, done well, brings the product or service closer to the customer in ways that would have been impossible before. Arguably, it makes some traditional customer communication unnecessary, because it puts the product directly in the hands of the customer.

**How AR Can Increase Revenue per Customer**

One of the recent themes of customer communication has been to make messaging more personal and more tangible.

Think about how rich media messaging services -- whether MMS, WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook Messenger, or similar -- up the game for promotional communication. They combine three crucial aspects:

- images, video, and audio that bring the promotion to life
- highly precise targeting
- the ability for the customer to respond effortlessly to the promotion in a natural and conversational way.

As good as they are, today’s rich media promotional messages are alive only on the screen. Introduce AR and they enter the real world.

Imagine a promotional message from a travel operator. They've opened a new resort on the Mediterranean. Rather than showing only video, what if the message let the customer explore the resort using their smartphone? How much more compelling would such a message be if the customer could place themselves at the destination?

Similarly, furniture companies are already offering customers apps that let them see how an item would look in their homes by placing a 3D model in the live feed from their smartphone.

**What You Can Do Today**

Augmented reality is here today. Using the OpenTok live video API, available from us here at Nexmo the Vonage API platform, you can already take live video from your customers, augment it with additional imagery and data, and then send it straight back to their devices in near real-time.

While automation and AI are the big customer communication stories of the moment, you should start planning your AR strategy today. Not only are your competitors likely to be doing so, but pretty soon AR will be a baseline requirement for any customer communication strategy.
Please fill out the form and we will be in touch with you shortly.

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