



Power to the people: the rise of virtual personal assistants

*In a world where your data is considered fair game for marketers, **Brian Blau** says the virtual personal assistant could give power over information back to the people...*

Without consumer protection, businesses will do what they can to collect, store and analyse consumer data in the pursuit of the next sale or one more customer interaction. As consumers increasingly realise the dynamic that is at play, they are likely to turn towards methods of limiting where and how their information is disseminated – and they will need the right tools to manage this process. This is giving rise to the concept of the virtual personal assistant.

Consumers generate more data than can be digested and are often oblivious of the degree to which companies aggregate information about them. Even if they are aware, it is very difficult to manage privacy to any level of detail; indeed, any business that puts in the effort can determine the identity of individuals – what they do and where they go – and can monitor what they say online.

Some signs already point to the fact that consumers are either consciously or subconsciously beginning to spread their personal data around multiple services in an effort to avoid putting all their personal information in one easily accessible source, such as Facebook. They are also responding by changing their privacy settings, valuing apps that protect their privacy, and demanding secure features from their technology providers.

But will the pendulum stop swinging? Will people's expectations about the value of their private data come to match what companies are doing with their data? Will users have the last say and gain control of their data by moving away from one-stop social networks and promoting regulatory relief that will limit the ability of businesses to gather consumer data?

This is an idea that my colleague Van Baker and I put forward as part of Gartner's 'Maverick' research programme, which is designed to deliberately expose unconventional thinking and may not agree with Gartner's official, peer-reviewed research positions.

In the near term, it is more likely that we will see a reactionary response as consumers realise how much data is being collected about them and either move to dilute the ability of technology providers to aggregate that data or pursue regulatory solutions.

The ultimate defence – the virtual personal assistant

Managing an online persona takes time and many individuals struggle to manage the task

themselves. Online persona managers, what Gartner defines as virtual personal assistants (VPA), are emerging as a solution for how consumers will not only keep their data private, but also increase its value.

Current VPAs are relatively limited, but advances are taking place rapidly. Their capabilities are increasing and more users are becoming familiar with them, especially on the smartphone. The next wave of VPAs will be 'hypersmart' – they will know us better and be able to help us with increasingly more complicated tasks.

For most of the current agent technologies, VPAs already track user location, as well as contacts, calendar entries, social media posts and Twitter feeds, and gather websites, text messages and emails associated with the individual.

Today consumers use VPAs such as Google's Now, Apple's Siri and Microsoft's Cortana. As these agents add consumer information, they learn the behaviours of the individual. This learning leads to new recommendations and notifications to which the user will respond, leading to more learning by the VPA; thus, in a virtuous circle, the agent technology gets progressively better. This process will lead to an environment where the agent will come to 'know' the user.

The appeal of VPAs will increase significantly as the agent has the potential to provide significant value as a way to discover products, services and other activities their user might be interested in, such as restaurants and entertainment venues they would enjoy and activities they might want to participate in. Conversely, the VPA can act to protect their user's information because they don't want it revealed, or because they believe their information is valuable and they want to be compensated for it.

What we are likely to see is users spreading different functions across multiple personal digital assistants to achieve separate benefits from different agents. VPAs will proliferate as a result, but users will slowly narrow the number of agent technologies they use as trust is established. If providers and individual users can successfully coexist without violation of trust, then the technology has significant future implications.

If the agent technologies can earn the trust of consumers, they may very well become the first line of defence for consumers wanting to manage, leverage and monetise their personal information.

If this trust emerges, and the agent technologies become established on a widespread basis, then businesses will have to rethink the way they engage with consumers.

There is a plus side for businesses, because they can assume that offers that make it through the filters of the agent technologies are very likely to be acted on. The number of exposures required and the number of interactions needed to complete a transaction could diminish significantly.

The old adage of reach and frequency will give way to highly targeted transactions. This will only be amplified if regulators put stricter controls on the information that businesses can gather about their customers.

Privacy becomes important, again

Some of these ideas might seem implausible as Facebook continues to grow and the time spent using social networks continues to increase; however, the fragmentation of social media applications and the desire for social integration across a wide range of mobile apps cannot be denied.

A number of trends are converging. The number – as well as the visibility and malicious intent – of breaches of consumer data is increasing. Consumer awareness is growing, and more consumers are voicing their concerns about the invasion of their privacy by technology. At the same time, the use of large social networks and the socialisation of mobile apps is also increasing. These trends, collectively, are on a collision course and, ultimately, will lead to change.

Businesses need to consider a world where most of their interactions with customers are initiated by their own systems and are responded to by agent technologies representing the consumer. This will have a profound impact on the nature of offers and incentives for the purchase of products and services. **f**



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