

Do people want to talk to bots?

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Humans are so passe. Facebook now wants to expand your social circle in its messaging app, Messenger, beyond friends to include robots - or chatbots - that are powered by artificial intelligence, and designed to shop, search and generally just get things done for you.

Wait, what? Yep. Facebook wants you to talk to robots. Every day. All day.

It's certainly a leap to think we, humans, want to connect with computer programs in the same space where we spill our guts to our closest pals, gossip with our co-workers and coordinate with family members to arrange life's most sacred events (weddings, funerals etc.).

Or maybe it's not.

"It's not completely weird for people 35 or younger to interact with machines," said eMarketer analyst Yory Wursmer. "The freakout factor is gone."

Though seemingly unfriendly, chatbots, or [bots](#) for short, are just software systems that simulate conversations. And, thanks to your smartphone, you likely already encounter a handful of different bots every day, as Wurmser suggested. Take Apple's Siri, Google Now or Amazon's Alexa, the virtual assistant that powers the e-commerce giant's Echo device. Other bots are even more commonplace, say automated text messages confirming a reservation or a package shipment.

A new breed of bots, however, are about to invade Messenger, the social network's insanely popular, highly personal chat app, now with more than 900 million users. Users who have, until now, communicated entirely with others in the human race. Facebook in April opened the floodgates, letting third-parties develop robot helpers for Messenger that will ideally make it more efficient to complete quotidian tasks.

In the same way you message a friend, you can now message a bot for weather updates, to order flowers, to buy a new pair of shoes or receive the day's top headlines.

The earliest entrants in Messenger's bot-dom include CNN, 1-800-Flowers and the shopping app Spring. With the 1-800-Flowers bot, you can, for instance, order flowers or chat with support just by sending messages in Messenger. So, as Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg put it, to order from 1-800-Flowers, you never have to call 1-800-Flowers again.

"I've never met anyone who likes calling a business," the executive said while unveiling his answer to the supposedly dreaded customer service call.

More bots are indeed on the way, meaning a pending onslaught of them will usher in a new era in mobile where information comes to you, on your terms - or at least that's the vision proffered by Zuckerberg and Messenger Vice President David Marcus. They believe you'll soon be opting for bots over mobile apps and, of course, those pesky 800-numbers. Because why should you have to hassle with opening other apps or speaking to a human to accomplish things?

"Chatbots are to you and me and today's culture, what call centers are to our parents' culture," said Brian Solis, the principal analyst at Altimeter and an expert on trends in social media.

Maybe so, but that assumes people will simply accept bots as their new besties. Pause to think about that. Siri may be handy when you need her, but she doesn't insert herself smack-dab in the middle of your personal life. And she doesn't constantly remind you of her presence, as some of Messenger's bots do. The CNN robot, for example, sends a daily message with the top headlines, which is great when you're in the mood for news, but also potentially annoying when you're not.

Still, it stands to reason that youngsters, in particular, who are already glued to their phones and do prefer to communicate via texts and mobile messages, will latch on to these bot-enabled friendships with benefits.

"Mobile pervasiveness is a fact of life," Solis said. He asserts, with statistics, that we're all being reprogrammed to make our phones the center of our universes. "Smartphone users look at their phones 1,500 times a week. That adds up to 177 minutes every day."

And, good or bad, kids are simply enamored with [artificial intelligence](#). Just observe a child converse with a voice-operated digital assistant. The interactions are oddly intuitive, and, more importantly, fun.

Case in point: Jason Woodmansee's three children, who range in age from 7 to 13, love to chat up Google's voice assistant, Google Now, so much so that he worries they might derive a little too much enjoyment from an Amazon Echo. The Echo is an in-home AI machine that can do a bit of everything. The device's human-like bot goes by the female name of Alexa and, in a conversational fashion, processes commands to play music or games, start timers or set alarms, and add items to shopping lists.

Woodmansee, 44, doesn't yet own an Echo, but he is toying with the idea of bringing the sophisticated bot into his San Diego home.

"They've grown up using touch screens, iPads and smartphones," he said, referring to his kids' familiarity with AI helpers. "They know how those things work."

Chatbots, however, have more than just generational appeal, said Rajesh Gupta, chair of the University of California at San Diego's computer science and engineering department. When time and place are factors - say you have an urgent billing issue at 10 p.m., and you're on the West Coast - chatting with a robot makes far more sense than placing a phone call or sending an email.

And, really, chatbots are not all that foreign, Gupta said.

"Chat is a mediator, not an end point, between you and me, me and my work, me and my documents," he said. "As a mediator, (chatbots) are just an extension of the computing platform, of the cell phone."

Of course, by adding bots to Messenger, Facebook risks creating a gregarious mess. The company is essentially inviting businesses into a friends-only zone, businesses that may or may not respect your messaging boundaries. Messenger users can certainly block a bad bot, but one rotten bot has the potential to sour people on them all.

That is absolutely a concern, Altimeter's Solis said. Brands are famous for applying their old marketing rule books to new mediums. This is a notion he refers to as "mediumism."

"Mediumism, a play on the word minimalism, is the idea that brands tend to use new platforms based on legacy models and tricks rather than imagining new possibilities," Solis said.

But he's confident that Zuckerberg, a self-professed champion of user experience over profits, can sort through the complications of

convincing nearly a billion people to talk to bots before the fad flames out. It certainly helps the Facebook chief's cause that smartphone and Internet usage has already evolved to reward the path of least resistance over the one that requires more work.

In Internet culture, when you're looking for something, you go to your social network connections and you ask for assistance, Solis said, as an example. "Chatbots are an evolution of that behavior."

In other words, lazy is the new smart and bots are better than friends.

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