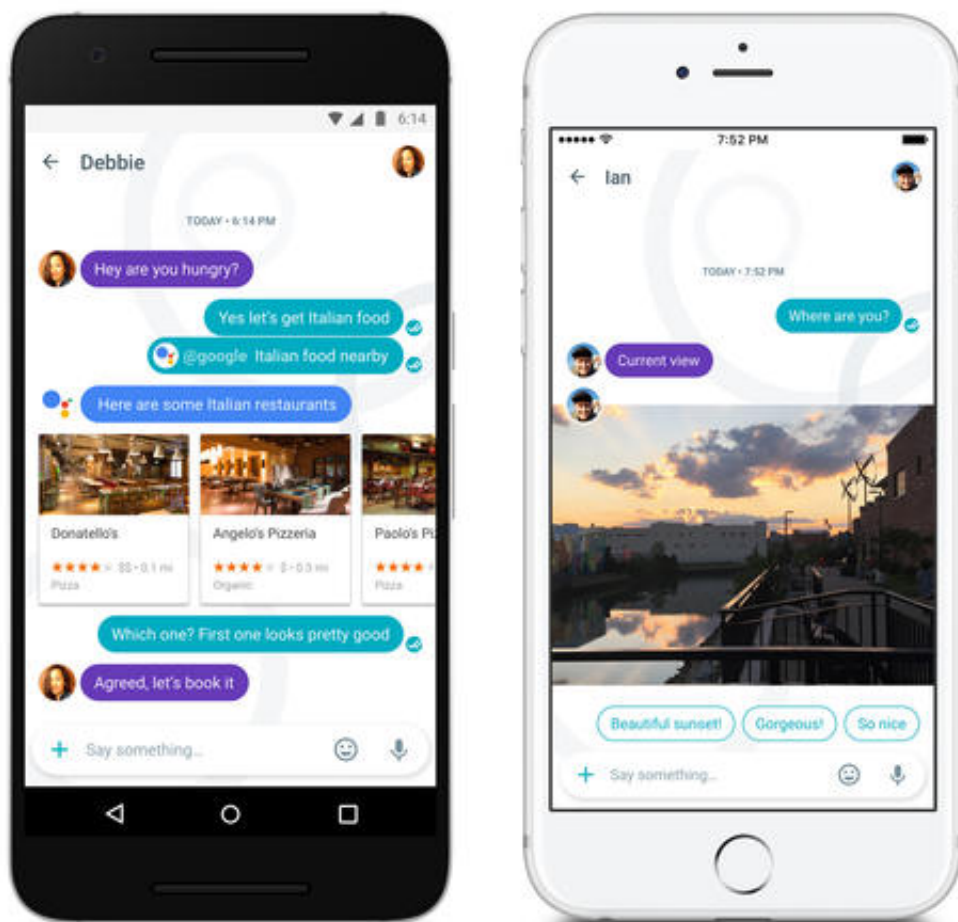


Google's Allo chat app is clever—just not all that smart

September 21 2016, by Anick Jesdanun



This photo combo of images provided by Google demonstrates the use of the company's new Allo app. Google wants to modernize phone chats by bringing a personal virtual assistant to conversations. The Allo app promises to be "smart" in the sense that the new Google Assistant will respond with restaurant recommendations when someone types, "Italian food nearby." It can also send

daily updates on weather and sports or suggest replies to friends' messages.
(Google via AP)

Google wants to add a middleman to your mobile chats—a personal virtual assistant who's not shy about interjecting itself into the conversation.

The new Allo app promises to be "smart," sort of. Its Google Assistant will butt in with restaurant recommendations when someone types, "Want to get sushi?" It can also send daily updates on weather and sports and will also suggest replies to your friends' messages.

The idea is to keep the conversation flowing, so you don't have to constantly leave Allo to look up something else.

Google is releasing the free chat app Wednesday, just a week after Apple updated its own Messages app with the iOS 10 software update . Messages works on iPhones and iPads, while Allo will work for iPhones and Android phones, but not tablets.

Do you really need another chat app? Here's more on Allo to help you decide.

SMART REPLIES

Allo can help cut down on typing on small screens by suggesting replies based on context. If a friend asks how you're doing, you can tap "Good tnx." Allo preserves chatting shortcuts such as "u" for "you." Apple offers something similar on its smartwatch, but not phones or tablets.

Allo will also analyze photos to suggest replies such as "beautiful smile" or "the skyline looks great!"—at least for photos with smiles or skylines. Remember that this is software, so its suggestions won't always make sense.

Of course, you're free to type your own response. Sending a computer-generated reply to a friend can feel, well, deceptive. Worse, it might make your friend wonder if your response is genuine. And having the suggestions appear in oval bubbles in the chat can make it seem as though a stranger has joined the chat (though you can shut out Google by enabling incognito mode).

PERSONAL ASSISTANT

When you're chatting with someone, you're often making plans. Google Assistant can retrieve information on nearby restaurants, movie times and even the weather. Everyone in the chat will see the Assistant's replies and can weigh in on the choices.

In some cases, Google Assistant will even anticipate your needs, such as when someone's asking about getting sushi. An oval bubble appears with an offer to retrieve nearby sushi restaurants. After choosing one, you can tap for opening hours, directions or the menu.

Reservations aren't available yet, though Google is considering third-party integrations such as OpenTable for dinner and Airbnb for accommodations. Apple's Messages doesn't invoke the Siri virtual assistant the same way, but it already offers integration with third-party apps so that you can make plans (and reservations) while chatting.

Beyond planning, Google Assistant can give you the latest news and

sports scores, translate phrases or do math calculations. Asking for directions will bring up Google Maps.

LIMITED SMARTS

The app's intelligence still feels, well, limited. Though Google Assistant is an evolution of the Google Now feature that has long been on phones, it doesn't do as much as Google Now in terms of identifying patterns or checking other Google services.

For instance, if a friend asks you when your flight leaves, Allo won't try to suggest a reply, even though Google has your calendar. Likewise, Google Assistant won't automatically offer traffic conditions or transit schedules for your regular commute the way Google Now does.

You can request daily updates on the weather, news and sports. But you can't get automatic updates whenever the score changes or a game ends.

Google calls its Assistant a preview. Following its debut on Allo, it will arrive on a smart speaker called Google Home this fall.

EXPRESSIONS

Plain text is boring, so Allo features a slider that can make your messages and emojis larger or smaller. You can send one of hundreds of virtual stickers specifically designed for Allo.

Apple's Messages app has a variation on this. You can make a message "loud," such that the chat bubble briefly gets larger. Or make it "gentle"

and appear in small text. Sticker packs are also available through a new app store within Messages.

One problem with both of these apps is that your friends need to be using the same app to see the desired effect. Google will send text messages to non-Allo friends, but without the special effects. Apple Messages will add notations such as "sent with Loud Effect" to those on Android or older versions of Messages.

TOO MANY APPS?

Beyond making its Assistant smarter, Google will need to persuade people they need yet another chat app, something that could be tough given that Google already offers four of them.

Google's Hangouts text and video calling service will be targeted at business users. Allo is the consumer offering, but won't offer video calling. That's where the Duo app comes in. And while Allo accounts are based on your phone number, not your Google ID, you can't use Allo to receive regular texts. On Android, Google has Messenger for that.

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