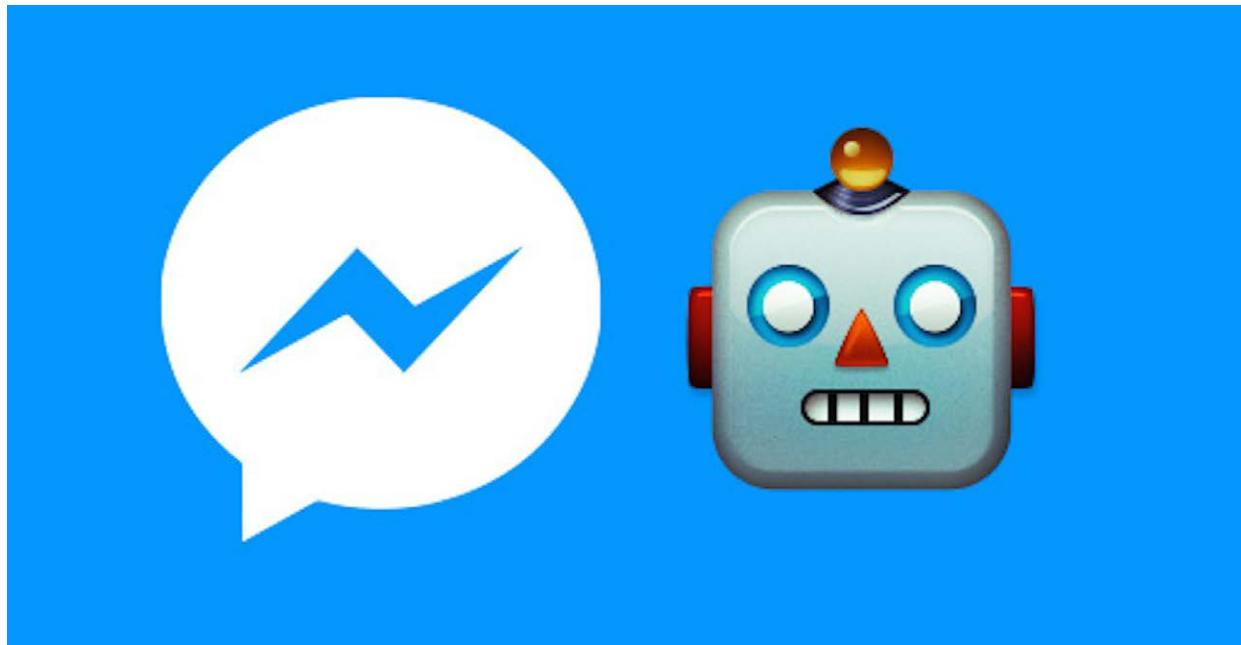


CONVERSATIONAL COMMERCE

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BUSINESS WISDOM SAYS: "IN THE FUTURE OF RETAIL, WE ARE NEVER NOT SHOPPING."



Retail experts predict that future transactions will fit into consumers' everyday lives seamlessly and not make them take special time out for shopping. Conversational commerce – a model where sales are made through the use of chats – is instrumental in achieving this, and chatbots are its main tool.

A chatbot is a program designed to conduct a conversation, usually through instant messaging. Retailers and brands have been using these to engage in communications with customers and learn about their taste and style, before offering them items from new collections in accordance with their preferences. Usually a conversation with a bot starts with multiple choice questions that allow the bot to build a customer profile, after which it sends outfit suggestions in message bubbles; in some cases, the actual sale can happen within the conversation, negating the need, for the consumer, to click through to the website.

Bots can be “built” on various platforms. **Burberry**, **Tommy Hilfiger** and other fashion brands use **Facebook Messenger**, which launched its “bot store” in 2016. The convenience is obvious: most consumers already have the app on their phones, so there is no need to convince them to download another one. If your business has a Facebook page, one of the easiest ways to build a simple bot on Messenger is through **chatfuel.com**. Other retailers, such as **H&M**, use other platforms, such as **kik.com**. Meanwhile, in China, the **WeChat** mobile messaging platform has 700 million monthly users, so businesses use it to “befriend” and chat with their clients and automatically translate messages into Mandarin.

The copywriting that goes into conversation templates used by the bot is crucial in convening the brand's identity. Thus, Tommy Hilfiger's bot, called **TMY.GRL** and created in partnership with artificial intelligence platform **msg.ai**, has a distinctive tongue-in-cheek texting language. “I'd totally raid your closet!” – it exclaims after the customer has answered style preference questions. When you choose “stripes” as your favorite print, it approves: “Hello there, trendsetter... Stripes is so in right now!”

Although chatbot conversations at the moment are limited (most bots cannot fulfill more complex requests), bots are self-learning: the more interactions they have, the better they become over time, learning to understand and predict consumer habits. There is no need for additional coding: the neural network behind the bot analyses all the conversations and fine-tunes reactions.

Does this mean that human labor in stores will soon become redundant? Absolutely not: some queries can only be resolved by a highly trained sales assistant, and most bots will redirect the customer to a real person if they cannot help. Besides, conversational commerce does not rely solely on bots: **Saks Fifth Avenue** recently launched a remote personal styling service where in-store sales associates sell items to consumers across a webcam – an omnichannel experience that marries technology and the human touch.