



How Conversational Messaging is driving Conversational Apps

A conversational app is one that uses conversational messaging to enable a customer to converse with a business seamlessly, across channels that they are comfortable with. The conversational app workflow takes the customer along an omnichannel journey that may start with a website, leading to an SMS, carry on, on a WhatsApp channel where a Whatsapp chatbot could guide the user to the culmination on a mobile app. The workflow could be a commerce workflow or a marketing workflow or a customer support workflow.



Customer engagement apps have evolved in the last three decades, but it has taken them a while to become truly conversational apps. In the mid-90s the browser was the platform and the website was the app, but it was more informational than a conversational app. Developers built web sites to enable specific use cases instead of building client-side applications. The application development focus was on the server-side and the client was rendering and providing functionality on demand. Customer engagement was anything but conversational and was limited to reading off the web or filling forms.

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In the mid-00s, with the rise of the smartphones, the mobile OS became the platform and developers built individual apps for specific use cases. Again, mobile apps are not conversational apps. The small screen added mobility and reached many more billions of users than possible with the large screen. While we gained more users, we went back to the client-side software development approach which existed before the web. The cost of development and upgrade is high, and app bloatware is becoming a problem again. To add to that is the problem that it is hard to use numerous apps on the small screen – while there are millions of apps out there, most of us use no more than a dozen on a given day. We are apped out!

And mobile apps are not conversational apps just like web applications are not. They use screens and buttons and wireframes and it requires a human to learn a new way of communicating with these interfaces, not the other way around. That’s until messaging came about.

Over the last 30 years, SMS has been the most common and consistent messaging channel. But SMS is not an engagement channel. Globally, businesses send 2 trillion text messages to consumers worldwide. These are mostly transactional messages notifying customers about information related to their transaction. SMS is limited in terms of enabling a two-way conversation.

Messaging really transformed for the smartphone and small screen world. The proliferation of messaging channels built on data services or “IP Messaging”, channels such as Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger and WeChat, to name a few, have started seeing consumer adoption in the billions. The messaging channels have taken over how consumers converse with friends and family.

Now messaging has become a platform and with the evolution of chatbots, actual conversational experiences are being built on top of them, to engage with customers on messaging channels that they are already used to – resulting in conversational messaging. A true conversational app could be possible only when conversational messaging became a reality.

Conversational app developers started building conversational apps using conversational messaging platforms, to support specific use cases. The end-user experience with conversational apps is also better suited to the small screen, since users don’t have to switch across different apps. They can stay within the messaging app that they already love, accomplishing all tasks through messaging. In China, WeChat – a “super app” – is the most popular conversational app. Why? It allows users to do everything within the app from booking a hotel room, to buying an article of clothing, to paying for takeout. These conversational apps enable users not just to communicate but also do a wide variety of transactions, including shopping, banking, insurance, payments, travel, taxis, food delivery, jobs, music, news, etc. These have now become super-apps that subsume many other conversational apps within them.

These are powerful illustrations of the power of conversational messaging which is finally making conversational apps a reality.

Conversational messaging is a new customer engagement paradigm that brings businesses and customers closer, by enabling human-like conversations on commerce, marketing and sales, on messaging channels that customers are already comfortable with.

