

Getting started with natural language

Practical guidance for organisations looking to take their first steps with conversational AI



CONNECT

Whitepaper

A solution from Connect.

If you're not already exploring how to use intelligent virtual assistants in your contact centre, you soon will be. The case for enabling customers to complete interactions without speaking to an agent keeps growing. Aside from the opportunities for cost savings, automation meets the expectations of customers who are accustomed to asking Alexa and speaking to Siri for information. What's more, it can help reduce wait times and increase capacity, while allowing human agents to focus on the more challenging and interesting interactions. That in turn can help with staff retention.

It's no surprise then that surveys repeatedly find that investing in tools that improve self-service – such as AI and chatbots – is a top priority for customer experience (CX) leaders in all fields. ¹

But while the reasons for doing so are clear, the reality remains a challenge. Organisations are rightly wary of providing automated chat that results in a poor experience, or no improvement on their existing interactive voice response (IVR) offer.

Solutions need to be capable of understanding customer intent and then either enabling them to complete the interaction via the bot or rerouting them promptly and appropriately to a different channel.

If the customer gets stuck, the interaction is slow or they are palmed off to a website they have already tried, the impact isn't neutral: it's negative.



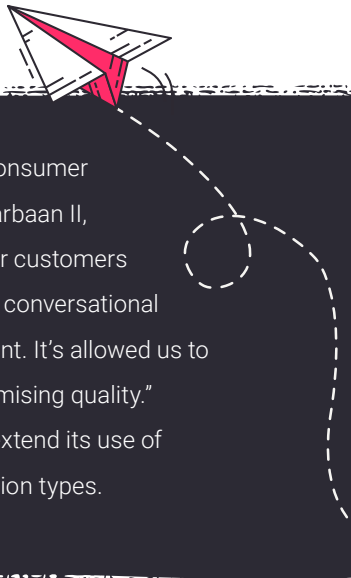
¹ See e.g. McKinsey & Company (2022) State of Customer Care Survey <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/operations/our-insights/the-state-of-customer-care-in-2022>

A new generation of natural language tools.

If the market was still dominated by the expensive and complex natural language solutions of previous generations, many might see the risks and costs as too great. But in recent years, the emergence of tools such as Google Dialogflow, Amazon Lex and IBM Watson have reset the parameters for natural language. Their usability, and usage-based pricing models, have put the ability to develop natural language based solutions in reach of many more organisations.

Further, solutions like Five9's Studio or Five9's Studio platform enable businesses without coding skills to design and build effective conversational interactions, **using any of the cloud-based natural language tools**. Those interactions can also be integrated seamlessly with CRM databases, such as Salesforce, finance systems or helpdesks/CEM tools, to provide a joined-up customer experience.

When floor cleaning product manufacturer BISSELL upgraded its contact centre, it wanted to provide customers with self-service options back by AI, to handle some of its 1 million+ interactions a year. It made use of Five9 Studio to develop conversation flows that mean Five9's Intelligent Virtual Agent can check order status, cancel an order, or register their product. This not only frees agents to handle more complex inquiries, but has increased containment rates by 15%.



BISSELL's Associate Director of Consumer Services and After-Sales, Razi Sharbaan II, is delighted with the outcome: "Our customers are receiving answers in a natural, conversational way without speaking to a live agent. It's allowed us to scale our service without compromising quality." The company is now planning to extend its use of automation to cover more interaction types.

How to get the most out of today's tools.

The potential of such solutions is clear. The business case for using them is compelling. But for organisations with little experience in this area, the challenge remains how to get the best out of them. One answer is of course to contract a partner with the skills and experience to build or implement a comprehensive solution for you, with end-to-end interaction design, platform selection and database integration.

But while that may offer the gold standard, the reality is that many businesses will need to, or prefer to, start on a smaller scale, with a pilot solution that builds their confidence in the technology and provides the foundation for the business case for wider investment.

Getting started with natural language.

For organisations in this position, the question then is how to make it happen. Drawing on our combined expertise developing, implementing and optimising conversational AI solutions, Connect and Five9 have identified the following fundamental steps to getting started with natural language.

1. Understand why customers contact you

The fundamental aim of introducing conversational AI is to enable customers to resolve queries without needing an agent to help them. So the first essential step is to understand what queries customers actually have.

Contact centres will typically have some data around the different call types they receive, but this may not be sufficiently disaggregated into specific tasks. For example, data from the IVR may tell you the number of calls you receive regarding deliveries, but this may not be broken down into sub-categories, such as requests to change a delivery date, enquiries about delivery status and complaints about missed deliveries.

If your existing data is limited, you can consider using speech analytics to get richer insight. That will not only give you robust data about why customers contact you, but can also help you understand the different ways they may articulate the same enquiry – which is relevant to building effective conversations. For example, “change my delivery date” and “reschedule delivery” amount to the same thing, so should open up the same conversation.

2. Use that data to work out the best opportunities for natural language

By analysing the data about contact drivers, you can identify the best opportunities for automation. Clearly, volume is a key factor in this process, but it’s not the only one. You may receive high volumes of calls about specific offers or contract renewals; but from the business perspective, these may be calls you want agents to focus on. Meanwhile, calls to pay bills may be the same or lower volume, but there is less necessity, from the business perspective, to have them handled by your human agents.

Another factor may be the complexity of the interaction. Some tasks may be so straightforward that they can be completed via IVR. These are typically those where there are very few options for the customer. The reason to add natural language is normally to make interactions more flexible and personal, in line with the brand and customer expectations.

So for instance, booking an appointment or budget hotel room may be sufficiently simple that it could be done without natural language. However, where the appointment is for a medical matter or the booking is for a luxury hotel – where there may be a range of additional services – the decision may be to go straight to a human.

The sweet spot, particularly when you're taking your first steps, is likely to be around interactions with some options – so there is a need for natural language – but not something that is too open and requires building too many conversation flows.

Once you've identified the best opportunities, prioritise them; it's better to start your natural language journey managing a few interaction types well than trying to do more, and becoming less effective.

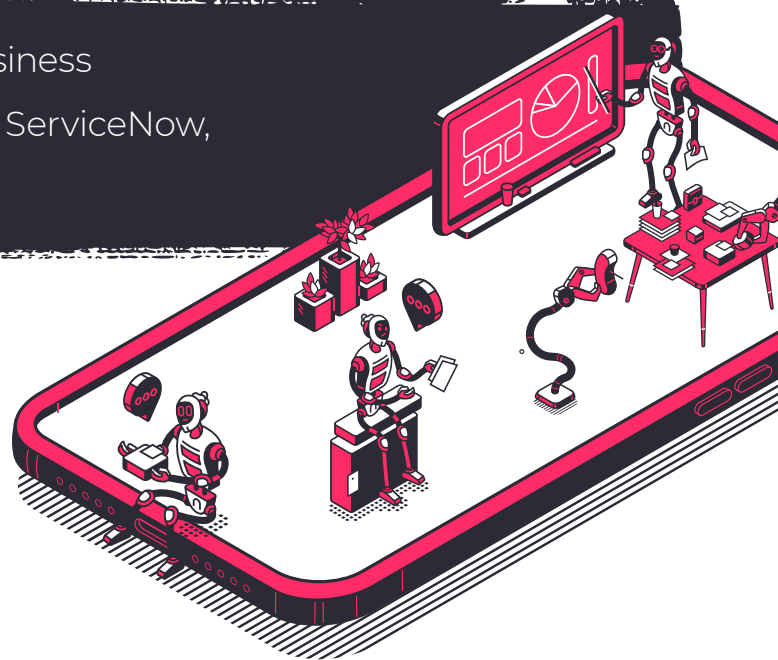
3. Design the interactions, reflecting user insight

Technically, this stage can be relatively simple. Tools like Five9 Studio give you all the capability you need to design conversation flows without having coding expertise. The graphical interface makes it easy for contact centre managers and administrators to replicate their scripts and workflows. That includes stages such as validating customer data, like the CRM platform, to recognise where a customer has raised the same issue before, or linking through to a billing system to confirm the amount.

Five9 Studio integrates with common business applications such as Salesforce, Zoho and ServiceNow, as well as many payment gateways.

You can also select which natural language engine you use: maybe you have a preferred one for all situations, where you've built up a list of your product names. Alternatively, you can use different ones for different types of interaction, taking advantage for instance of IBM Watson's additional capacity for financial interactions.

But the technical side is only part of the process. To offer an effective customer experience, you need to think about the conversations from their perspective. What additional questions might they have that don't follow the 'preferred' script? How might they articulate concerns or potential dissatisfaction - and what should your response be?



It's easy to underestimate the complexity of creating dialogues that can deal with these issues. In particular, it's vital that you make sure there are no options or possibilities that aren't addressed. That might mean building in elements that invite the customer to rephrase their request, and if it is still not clear, having a process for handing the interaction to a human to complete it.

4. Make the conversation reflect your brand

Getting the right tone of voice for your conversations is also vital. Just because the interaction is automated, it doesn't have to sound like it. A key advantage of natural language is that you can add personality. The question is how much?

Our advice is to follow your brand guidelines and contact centre scripts in terms of tone. If you're an established bank, you will and should sound different from a born-digital retailer.

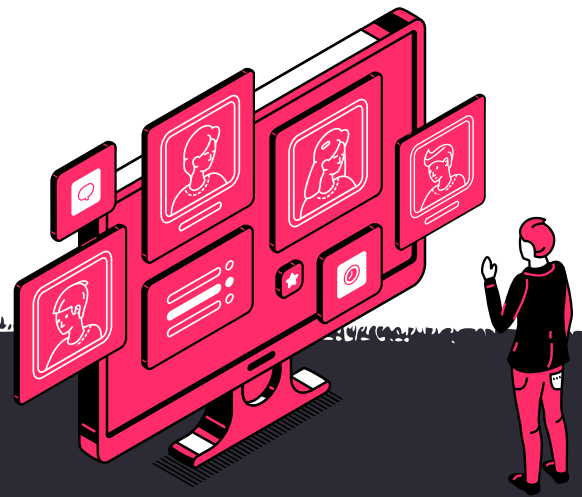
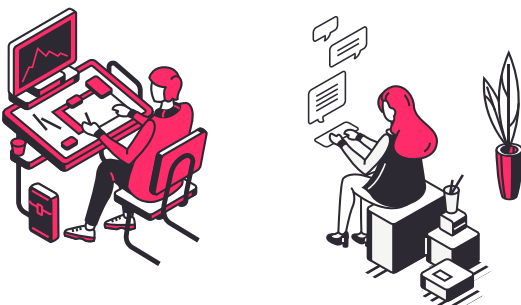
In addition, you should reflect the type of interaction the customer is carrying out. If they're just paying a bill, there's no need for lots of chat; they simply want to get it done quickly and accurately. If they are booking a holiday or tickets for an event, then they may be more open to further conversation or more friendly language.

5. Test with real users

With the conversations built, allow time for testing: don't go for a "big bang" implementation. While initial functional testing can be done in house – or via a trusted partner, such as Connect – we strongly recommend testing the solution fully with a focus group of customers.

As well as seeking their feedback on the experience, track carefully how effective the interactions are. Can customers achieve what they want? Are there gaps in the conversations or misunderstandings that you can readily address?

This is vital insight that can help ensure a positive CX when you move into a live environment.



Names and avatars can help give character and colour: just don't pretend for a second that customers are dealing with a human. That's the fastest route to frustration... and ridicule.

6. Tuning the solution never ends

Even the most robust testing before launch doesn't stop the need for ongoing evolution of your conversational AI platform. You need to fine-tune it on an ongoing basis, to ensure it reflects changes in customer language and in your business.

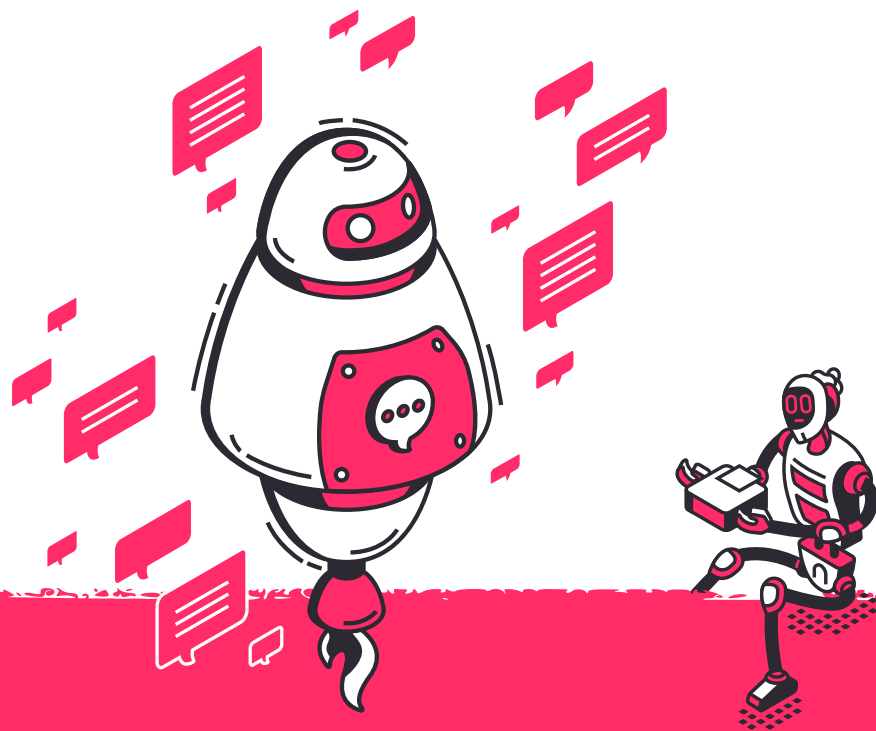
Launched new products? Make sure the underlying language database is updated to include those. It's also logical to keep your contact centre chat bot aligned with the tools underpinning online self-service, to ensure a joined-up user experience.

One of the advantages of Five9 Studio is that it's easy to make these changes yourself. You don't need to go back to the solution provider to arrange a complex and expensive change process.

7. If you want to add more complex interactions, talk to an expert

Finally and crucially, our tips here are designed for organisations looking to get started with natural language; those who want to use it for a specific set of interactions and build confidence and capability. If you're seeking a more comprehensive solution, or want to enable your virtual assistants to manage more complex enquiries, you'll save time, stress and ultimately money by getting an expert partner involved.

For example, Connect's conversational AI specialists have a wealth of experience building and refining solutions to meet different business needs. They have deep insight into user journeys and the linguistic variations that may occur. That experience, focus, and the fact that they are doing this day in, day out, means that they will be able to build a solution far quicker than almost any in-house team. That in turns means faster time to value – and often a far more robust and higher quality solution too.



Next Steps

For more details of Connect's conversational AI services, from conversation design to testing, please contact Connect.



We're Connect, the independent communications experts who can transform how your organisation communicates – both internally and externally. We deliver solutions and services that join up your employee and customer communications across platforms, across sites and across countries.

Crucially, while trusted by many vendors, we're independent of all of them – enabling us to recommend, implement and integrate the right options for your requirements. Communication feels effortless when it's done right: we're here to show you how.

Five9 is an industry-leading provider of cloud contact center solutions, bringing the power of cloud innovation to more than 2,000 customers worldwide and facilitating billions of customer engagements annually. The Five9 Intelligent Cloud Contact Center provides digital engagement, analytics, workflow automation, workforce optimization, and practical AI to help customers reimagine their customer experience.

Designed to be reliable, secure, compliant, and scalable, the Five9 platform helps increase agent and supervisor productivity, connects the contact center to the business, and ultimately deliver tangible business results including increased revenue and enhanced customer trust and loyalty.



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