

The Ultimate Guide to Conversational Marketing

BACKGROUND

The road from marketing-qualified lead to sales-qualified lead can be a long one, and it's a road that seems to have more exits than on-ramps. But this process can — and must — be sped up to increase your lead conversion rate.

Instead of hiring beyond your plans and budget, consider how automation and AI don't get tired, they can't have too much on their plate, and they never get frustrated in the face of failure. The lead often doesn't even realize they aren't communicating with a flesh-and-blood salesperson when they're speaking to conversational AI.

Lead conversion stalls due to slow follow-up on qualified leads — but conversational AI automation can always respond briskly no matter the volume of leads.

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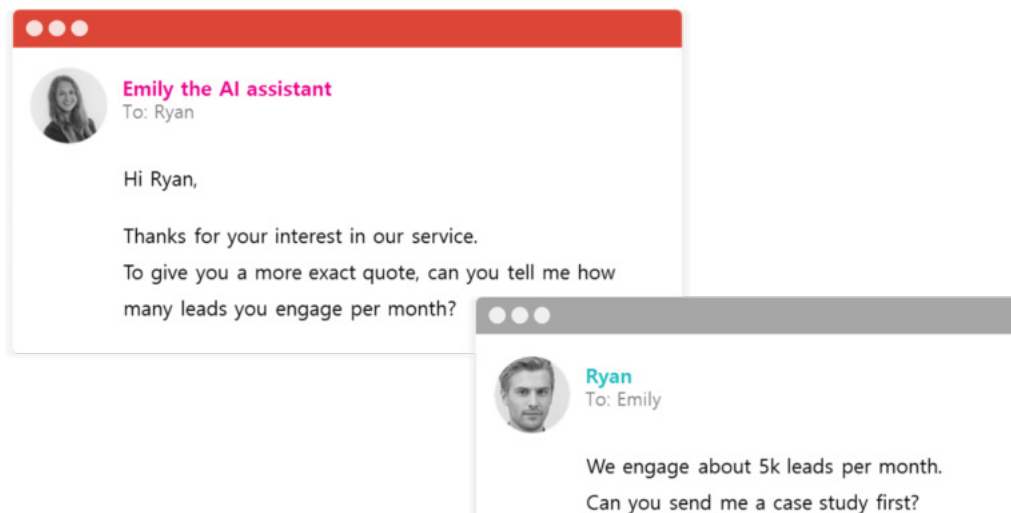
WHAT IS CONVERSATIONAL AI?

A quick rundown for the unfamiliar: Conversational AI is an artificial intelligence that uses a combination of machine learning and natural language processing (NLP) to speak and respond as a human would. Machine learning means the AI isn't saddled to a static database of rote responses like chatbots with simple programmed responses; instead, it analyzes human speech and learns from past conversations.

Conversational AI (often being referred to as Conversational Marketing) can involve chatbots, virtual assistants, automated email communication, or all three, depending on your strategy.

When a lead fills out a form, or signs up for a newsletter, or engages with you enough to provide an email address, a conversational AI (like the Exceed platform) will reach out to the lead. The AI can then analyze the text of the lead's response and reach into a database to find the most appropriate responses.

Conversational AI carries the load for marketing and sales when there's a high volume of unqualified leads. Not only does it save time for the team, but conversational AI platforms can also help determine whether leads are worthwhile and pass them onto a salesperson.



CONVERSATIONAL MARKETING WEEDS OUT BAD LEADS

Lead conversion from marketing to sales (or from sales to purchase) can be a matter of persistence, luck, or charm — but qualified leads have a better shot at a high rate of conversion. Superior leads also mean less salesperson time is wasted on unqualified leads.

Conversational AI can respond to leads and sort them by relevance and potential. In the inquiry phase, conversational AI can field questions about your business (through chatbots on your website or through email). Not only can it answer a wide range of questions, conversational AI will ask questions and perform its own lead scoring based on your own lead scoring system.

The virtual assistant will hand off priority leads to real-life salespeople when the lead has shown it's ready to travel down the funnel. It will also keep less-qualified leads in the conversation with the AI until the lead shapes up.

CONVERSATIONAL MARKETING SPEEDS UP LEAD ENGAGEMENT

Lead conversion fails when leads are either given up on, ignored, or just too numerous to address in a timely fashion — conversational Marketing doesn't have those problems.

Natural-language AI can respond to chat forms and emails from potential customers immediately and will follow up with nudges and bumps at a customized pace to help keep leads engaged.

ChannelSight, [an eCommerce Solutions company](#), embraced conversational AI to bolster their marketing efforts.

ChannelSight team claimed that, [after adding virtual assistants to their sales team](#), they saved 20% of their time on lead qualification and nurturing. They further stated that these virtual assistants helped the team actively engage twice as many leads as normal.

The virtual assistants achieved this by using conversational AI to reach out to leads at every level of the funnel to keep them informed, engaged, and thinking about ChannelSight.

Fewer initial leads went without initial outreach, fewer unresponsive leads were given up on, and skittish leads were kept in the loop to facilitate future conversion.

CONVERSATIONAL MARKETING CAN'T IGNORE LEADS

Marketing may be sending plenty of leads to sales, but sales may not be chasing every lead.

This is often just a function of time and mental space — the sales team is human, and when leads become numerous, a kind of [sales triage happens](#). If the team only has X number of hours in the day and 3x the leads, simple math says it can't be done. So sales chases the most qualified leads and does their best to follow up when they can.

But marketing can use conversational AI platforms, combined with automated emails, to send emails to those less-than-qualified leads. These virtual assistants can ask questions to get a feel for how useful these leads might be — where is the lead located, what industry are they in, what are their needs, what is their current solution?

Once a lead has been qualified through the virtual assistant or through the normal machinery of your lead scoring or sales process, they are introduced to real live people.

But, in the same way sales might be forced to ignore cold, dead, or green leads, sales can also end up letting a lead languish in CRM purgatory if the lead stops responding.

AUTOMATION PREVENTS LEADS FROM FALLING BY THE WAYSIDE

Is sales giving up on leads? Are they not following through on emails? Are they — quite understandably — giving up after four or five emails and half a dozen phone calls? Well, that's not unusual — salesperson time is time better spent on leads, clients, and customers that consistently respond.

Conversational Marketing can help prevent unresponsive leads from falling off the radar.

Some leads get ignored because they're just not ready yet — but green leads can still turn around after weeks or even months. The key to speeding up this process is keeping the lead engaged. Don't let that green lead forget that you exist; that lead could still be out there shopping and researching. Conversational Marketing can create an eventual conversion through regular follow up with a green lead, without wasting precious sales or marketing time.

They won't get tired, they won't get discouraged — a Conversational AI will perform the task you give them until judgment day.

Each level of follow-up is different, too. The virtual assistant isn't just spamming the same message in hopes that the lead will convert out of sheer irritation. Instead, the virtual assistant may follow up a few times in the first week, then once a week, then once a month, each time generating naturalistic language to provide new or useful information to the lead based on the data you've gathered on them.

CONVERSATIONAL MARKETING CAN AUGMENT SDRS OR BE THERE WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE SDRS

Sales-development reps can be extremely useful to a sales team, increasing lead conversion rates through regular nurturing and persistence.

But SDRs can be expensive, and they can run out of capacity the same as anyone else. So the solution to hitting max capacity on lead-chasing is usually to hire more SDRs. Instead, think of how automated emails with Conversational Marketing can do much of the time-consuming, repetitive SDR follow-up task but more scalable, with little to no commensurate increase in cost.

Conversational Marketing platforms nurture leads through consistent natural-language communication, in much the same way SDRs do.

This doesn't necessarily mean conversational AI is replacing SDRs (or that it should), but it does mean that SDRs' capacity can be freed up by virtual assistants, leaving them to qualify and go after real, solid leads. Conversational AI can be a helpful tool to SDRs, not a competition, and can help SDRs schedule meetings and calls with only the most promising leads.

CONVERSATIONAL MARKETING EMAILS SHORTEN THE SALES CYCLE

Automated conversational emails keep leads informed, engaged, and moving down the funnel — and we can give you examples of how to best utilize conversational AI to shorten your sales cycle.

The Inquiry Phase. At the top of conversational AI funnel, you have chatbots — they ask and answer simple questions: “When are you open,” “I can’t find a phone number,” or “Do you have a newsletter?” Chatbots are hardly new — and they’re ubiquitous at this point — but they are effective.

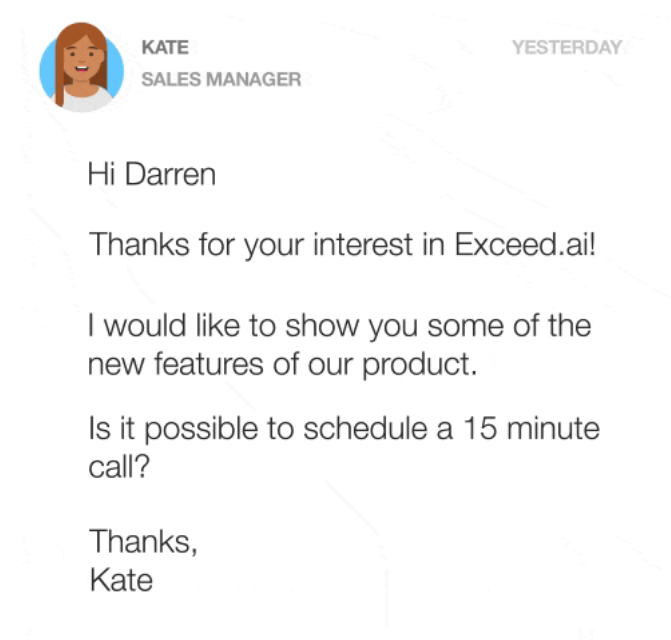
Obviously, a platform with better NLP and deep learning will provide better answers and more-human responses, but there’s a limit to how far a chatbot can take a lead down the funnel. Users are also mostly aware that chatbots aren’t real, which may color their interactions.

Sixty-five percent are concerned that chatbots will have a “lack of understanding of the issue” being raised, according to a 2019 NewVoiceMedia survey. Almost half of those surveyed felt that chatbots were actively keeping them away from a live agent. Consumer trust in chatbots is clearly low — they can deftly answer questions and start a conversation, but they’re only the opening gambit in a long, complex game.

More naturalistic language processing in your chatbot will prove more effective, at least, quickly moving them to the next phase of the sales cycle.

The Discovery Phase. Conversational Marketing platforms like Exceed speed up the discovery phase and convert leads faster by reaching out immediately, in an email, with actual information based on the lead’s inquiry. They’ll also include whatever action items you like: catalogs, white papers, and meeting invites.

When a potential customer sends a serious question to your business, they’ll receive an email like this:



If “Darren” in the example responds with, “Sure, tell me more about your service’s features,” the “Kate” virtual assistant will do just that, providing any information you’ve allowed her to hand out. If Darren responds with, “Sure, I’d love to talk about X, Y, or Z,” Kate is empowered to connect to the schedules of the sales team and slot that call into the appropriate team member’s calendar.

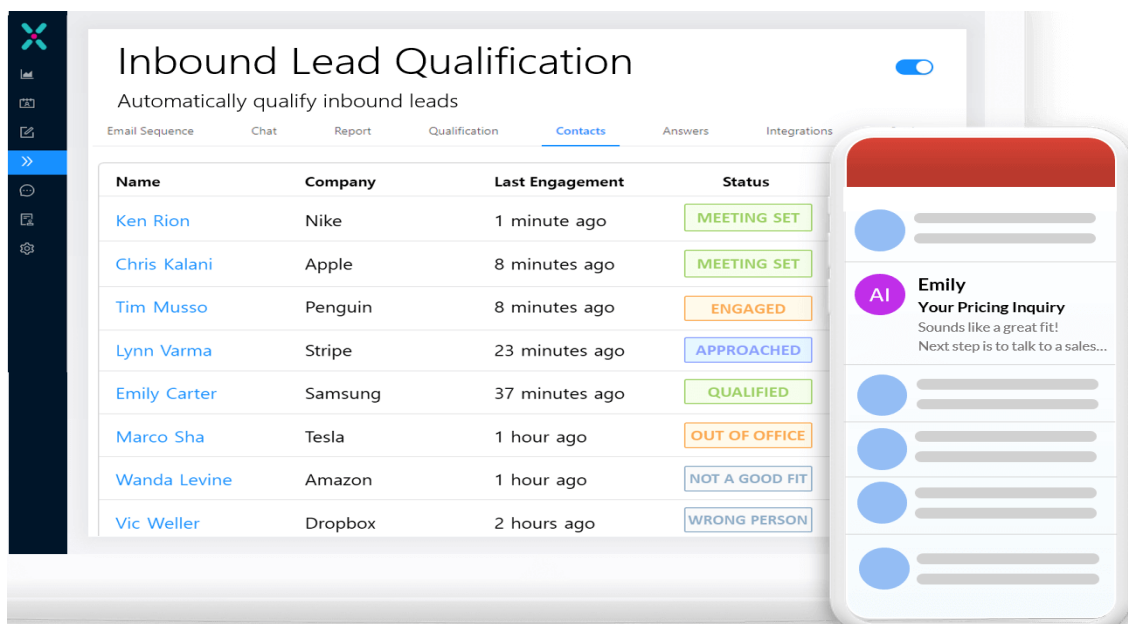
If the AI assistant runs into an unusual question or a question it can’t possibly answer, the virtual assistant will know to alert a salesperson, SDR, or marketing person. The assistant knows when the human touch may be required to keep the conversation going.

The Nurturing Phase. We're all aware that the funnel isn't a one-way street — leads come and go. They fly back up the funnel when they get spooked or when the situation at their company changes.

Conversational email can keep these skittish leads "on the hook," so to speak, by using personalized messages to check up on them, their progress, and their business. This isn't a matter of "How's your wife, Sophia, doing?" but more about combining the data your CRM has with the data the virtual assistant has helped you gather.

A virtual assistant can send announcements on new features to leads who've been shown to have custom or unusual needs. The virtual assistant can reach out to financially overburdened leads only with discount emails or newsletters that offer deals. They may even be used to regain customers; if a customer left because your service or goods were lacking a specific component, and you've since upgraded or expanded your stock, the virtual assistant can reopen those lines of communication only for the relevant parties.

Conversational emails can be customized for any particular lead, at any level of the funnel, with the outreach message of your choice, creating a repeating cycle of lead engagement and potential lead conversion that won't fall afoul of human limitations.



FAST ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PERSONAL TOUCH CONVERTS LEADS

We can see how conversational marketing speeds up every aspect of lead conversion:

- Human-like chatbots get the lead interested and engaged quickly, providing all contact data and answering basic questions about your business.
- Conversational emails answer initial questions with more detail and can retrieve marketing materials, catalogs, specs, or whatever data you empower it to give to curious leads.
- Virtual assistants will ask questions, filling out your CRM and facilitating lead scoring.
- Virtual assistants will speed up the nurturing process by following up no matter how unresponsive or unqualified the lead is, helping sales prioritize the leads that matter and saving time for everyone.

But there are more benefits than a shortened sales cycle.

Conversational AI feels like a person, which is the kind of personal touch consumers remember: [84% of customers](#) in a Salesforce “State of Marketing” survey said that being treated like a person instead of a number was very important to winning and keeping their business.

Many leads (and customers) may never realize that their initial contact was a heuristic NLP virtual assistant — you may get asked how “Kate” is doing these days.

**READY TO GET CONVERSATIONAL?
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