CEOCFO Magazine

Q&A with Pradeep Rathinam, Founder and CEO of SmartAssist.io providing a Customer Support Automation Solution that Predicts and Offers Agents Accurate Curated Responses

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CEOCFO: *Mr. Rathinam, according to the SmartAssist site, you are improving the future by learning from the past. How are you doing so?*
Mr. Rathinam: We have a solution that automates customer support. Our artificial intelligence service looks into historical interactions between the support agents and customers of a business. Based on the past interactions, we predict and offer the agents curated responses that are very accurate. Therefore, every time a new issue or question comes up from a customer we are able to provide and suggest responses for the agent. This way the agent can focus their energies on adding their personal touch and empathy.

CEOCFO: *Would you give us an example of a question and what you might supply to the agent?*
Mr. Rathinam: A typical business may have a question from a customer coming in saying, "The product is not working, I am unable to log into the system, can you help?" The issue could be something like the credit card has expired or the service is down. In order for the agent to go and understand that the credit card has expired they need to go into another system or look at the customer record. SmartAssist offers the ability to integrate into a customer's business applications like their credit card system, customer record, transaction history etc. Then we can help them understand that the reason why the customer had not been able to log into the system is because the credit card has expired. We curate on that response as soon as the question comes in saying, "Dear [customer name], the reason you are not able to log in is this…" Then the agent picks a recommended response, clicks that and does not have to type an answer, we autofill that for the agent.

There are several other examples. If you have a product refund, how do you solve that problem? Today, you typically call an agent or you write an email or write a text, or you have a form in an app saying, "My product size does not fit and I wish to exchange this." SmartAssist enables a way by which the agent has all of the data about the customer, the order, the transaction, the profile and then a curator responds saying; "for any customer refunds here is the standard protocol and here is the standard response." We curate that response for the agent and by speeding up that process, it helps to improve agent productivity drastically.

CEOCFO: *How are you able to integrate with a customer's various systems? How are you able to communicate with what might be several systems that a company has to get to the right data quickly?*

Mr. Rathinam: Every business has a customer support system where they log all questions and issues that come in from their customers. SmartAssist integrates into these customer support systems like Salesforce, Service Cloud and Zendesk. For an agent to be effective it is a simple – they need to respond with speed, accuracy and empathy. They often have to look into multiple systems to answer, "Is there an outage in your area? Did you not pay the bill in the last month that this service has stopped working?" We integrate with those systems and we bring that into the customer support system so that the agent is looking at one console instead of logging into three systems. We enable agents to look in to one console and get a full view of their customer, so that they can be much more effective in responding as well as having as three hundred and sixty degree view of what is happening with the customer.

Our system makes sense of consumer questions and knows what should be the response. We give agents response templates so agents have something to start with, and can then add a personal touch and empathy. Here is an example: "Dear customer, I am sorry that your service has been down. There was a severe thunderstorm in Oklahoma, so we have had a small outage there." We make customer support systems holistic by offering integration into other systems and bringing that to the agent to make them productive and effective. Our name is SmartAssist because we believe it is about using intelligence and technology to assist the agent to be more effective.

CEOCFO: *How often might you make changes based on questions and answers? Does that happen every day?*

Mr. Rathinam: Our system is constantly learning – every time a response changes our system learns. That is the beauty of artificial intelligence. It is all about adaptive systems that learn the behavior. The agents are the experts. Therefore, if they are continuously writing a new response because something has changed in the business the system understands and adapts that and changes the response template for the agent in real time. When this happens, we tell customer support managers, "We are noticing that your agents are using a personal macro and this is the kind of text that they are using for responding to customers. You may want to include this as a standard template."

> **"Customer service is the most important touch point after a person has bought a product or service… In this digital world, customer experience is the core for a business as it is five times more expensive to acquire a new customer than to retain one and grow that business."- Pradeep Rathinam**

CEOCFO: *Is it strictly the particular issue or question or do nuances like time of day, male or female or geographic location of the caller make a difference? Can you measure that?*

Mr. Rathinam: SmartAssist cares about the question! People are excellent at handling nuance. We expect the agent to handle nuances such as the tone. We can help companies understand the sentiment of the question and be able to route it to the right agent. Businesses have multiple tiers of support, different parts like billing, finance questions, quality of service, technical support etc. The first thing our software does is route tickets to the right person. A lot of businesses will use rules or put their most experienced agents to triage and route the issues to the right person/pod. Our service is based on artificial intelligence, so by reading the language of the text, we understand the issue and say this issue should be routed to X, Y and Z person or tier/pod, because they are most competent to answer the question. The second piece of our software is the response. Once we route a ticket to the right person we give agents the top three recommended answers (the tech is so good that the first answer is almost always right). When our confidence is low and we indicate that and always display three choices. Agents have the choice to pick a recommended response or do a search using our search bar to find other answers.

CEOCFO: *You mentioned tone. How do you assess tone?*

Mr. Rathinam: The natural language processing algorithm is the secret sauce to our software which enables our it to understand what is the question, who is asking it, what their profile is and also what their tone is. Is there a swear word in it? Is there a sense of unpleasantness in it? This would cause the ticket to be automatically tagged and determine next steps. If there are certain key words, it will be routed straight to a call center agent who can immediately call the customer or send an immediate response saying, "We will call you back in a few minutes".

CEOCFO: *How do the actual customer support people feel about the system? What, if anything, have you tweaked from reps input?*

Mr. Rathinam: Customer support professionals are the reason why we exist as a business and they love our software! They are the primary users we are targeting and we want them to use our software to improve their productivity. They live inside of the customer support system, and our software works seamlessly with their existing workflow. Therefore, if you are an agent using Salesforce Service Cloud, we have a console on the right hand side with the same interface they use,

but with the right answers. They click their answer and it curates it into an email that makes them way more productive. If an agent is clearing fifty tickets a day, they can potentially clear seventy five to one hundred tickets using software like ours. If they cannot find the answer because it is a complex question, our search functionality is also very powerful and helps them find the right answers. We optimize our software for our customers agents, because they are our primary stakeholders and they are the people who are on the front lines of all of the questions that are being fired at them. Therefore, it is our goal to make them more productive, to make them more agile, to make them more responsive. Everything that we do in our software is to enable them to be more successful.

CEOCFO: *You had a recent funding for SmartAssist. How will you be using the funds? What is your plan for the next year or so?*
Mr. Rathinam: We want to build on this product and to add functionality beyond what it does today. We are currently a market leader in providing automated responses to electronic support tickets (email, text, web form, forums, social feeds) and in the future, we want to expand it to chats. We are scaling sales and marketing because we have a product in market with over twenty marquee customers. We are available in over twenty languages, so we plan to go international and grow our business across multiple countries. Therefore, we will scale our sales and marketing, invest heavily in research and development, and enable this on multiple systems beyond Salesforce and Zendesk into Oracle and Microsoft.

CEOCFO: *Has there been a seamless transition from GE and Wise.io to SmartAssist, so that there is no change for your customers?*
Mr. Rathinam: The transition has been very smooth, there has been no change for our customers, except they are dealing with a new entity. The platform, the technology is robust! Customers have continued to experience the same level of service. We have a great partnership. GE has equity in SmartAssist as it is a spinout. We have a deep relationship where we have an executive from GE on our board of directors, they continue to provide us strategic guidance and they are vested in our success of our business.

CEOCFO: *What is the competitive landscape?*
Mr. Rathinam: The competitive landscape is always going to be that the customer support systems that we are building this on top of will want to build AI functionality. They will all want to add artificial intelligence. Customer support systems were traditionally designed for registering a ticket and routing it to an agent. We are focused on one thing; on answering the question for the customers, on solving the customer pain. For us it is all about giving the answers to the agent and to their customers. We are laser focused on doing that, because we believe the customer support systems will get re-imagined in the future.

CEOCFO: *Are companies focused enough on customer service? Do you see certain types of companies that understand more? Do you see a growing understanding of the need to provide something better for customers?*
Mr. Rathinam: Customer service is the most important touch point after a person has bought a product or service. Businesses now realize that customer experience reflects on their brand. In this digital world, customer experience is the core for a business as it is five times more expensive to acquire a new customer than to retain one and grow that business. Therefore, we are seeing the traditional view of customer service being a cost as changing. We are seeing businesses ask how do we understand how customers use the product, interact with the brand and how can we wrap it as a part of their overall digital experience. Businesses are asking how they offer a consistent omnichannel experience irrespective of whether a customer comes to their web, mobile app or comes to a store; how do they give them that seamless experience and help them through that whole journey. We are seeing that more and more. It does not matter what kind of business it is. In this whole world of digital transformation revolution, we are seeing that customer support is the new marketing, the new mantra and the new brand. Customer support is the extension of the brand that people experience and are stitching that into the core fabric of their business in every way.