Why Now is The Right Time For Government Agencies To Add A Chatbot

The Situation

For many reasons, the pandemic year, starting in March 2020, has permanently affected the way people do business; interact with colleagues, friends and family; and shop or be entertained. The pandemic has also made it OK to do everything from one location, your home, and to do all interactions via your home computer or mobile phone. This makes the overriding change we all have in common is the increased percentage of time spent online.

We go online to communicate via social media platforms or send emails. We go to work or school virtually and have classes and meetings via online conferences on Zoom, WebEx, or Skype. We buy clothes, furniture; electronics and food online. We pay our bills, sign documents, fill out applications, all through online portals. And for Government Agencies that already face a division with their constituents, the pandemic has made building relationships with their customers even harder.

The Challenge

How can Government agencies continue to serve their constituents when they have been physically pushed further apart? Most Government offices provide limited or no access to their constituents or employees. Everyone is working remotely and apart, but everyone still needs to get things done. People still need to renew IDs, register to vote, participate in social programs; get married or divorced; apply for business licenses; and most importantly, get information about Covid-19. The pandemic has had many negative effects; however, one very positive outcome is forcing our government agencies to shift towards using more digital services.

Over the last year, new digital services have been set up to replace more than 80% of office-based services, and with added benefits. Creative government CIOs have taken advantage of the demands of Covid-19 to build new online applications; update or replace old legacy systems; and collaborate with other Government Agencies to share information and better help their constituents. However, one government mainstay that has not changed, and in fact has become strained by the pandemic is the call centers.

Many people still want personalized, one-to-one help when interacting with local government. Government websites are notorious for being over stuffed information. But after searching a government website without immediate results, many a constituent will reach for the phone instead of wasting more time. But even the phone offers little help when the backed-up call centers leave people on hold for as long as they can stand, and only speak English.

So, what can provide constituents with personalized answers to their questions, in their language of choice and without the wait?

A chatbot.
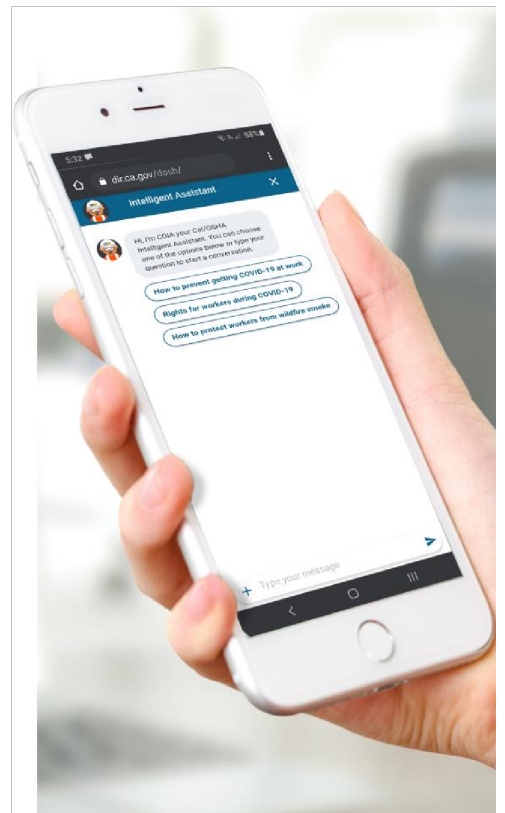
The Solution

According to the 2020-State-CIO-Survey** chatbots were identified by 76% of all State CIOs as the top emerging technology added during the pandemic, followed loosely by mobile applications with 53%. These chatbots, or virtual agents, can act as the first stop for online citizen inquiries before contacting a live agent.

To put things in perspective, think of your website's homepage as the lobby to your office, adding a chatbot is like the receptionist, directing your visitors. Without a 'receptionist' to aid your visitors, you basically leave you guest looking at the directory (homepage) to find their destination or asking others in the lobby for help (search bar).

By adding a chatbot to your website, you are setting the base for a better online experience. With the right chatbot, you can save time, save resources, and increase the value to your visitor.

**2020-State-CIO-Survey by NASCIO, Grant Thornton, CompTIA March 30th, 2021

The Top 8 Benefits of adding a chatbot

FOR YOUR CONSTITUENTS	FOR THE GOVERNMENT AGENCY
Is available to answer questions 24/7	Works 24/7
Provides consistent answers to often asked questions	Easily trained to provide consistent answers to common questions, and add new answers for unanswered questions
Creates a dialog with the visitor that can be easily copied or saved	Provides valuable analytics about most asked questions, constituent needs and trends
Can quickly provide answers with combined information collected from across the website	Can reduce Call Center volume
Never on Hold, Is capable of multiple simultaneous conversations	Is capable of multiple simultaneous conversations, visitors are not put on hold
Can access remotely from computers or phones and even with poor internet connections	Increases Constituent Reach
Is Multi-lingual	
Is anonymous	Minimal startup investment
Is very direct and is void of opinion or emotion	Improves overall Customer Service

Types of chatbots

Chatbots have been growing in presence for over 20 years. Often seen on online shopping sites, chatbots have been helping people answer simple questions about their orders or providing customer support. Seeing chatbots on government websites is new, which is due to the expansion in chatbot functionality. The type of chatbot you select depends on the complexity of your information to be shared, the diversity of the requests, and the amount of oversight and support. Buying an item from a static clothing catalog is very different from helping someone pick out the insurance benefits they deserve.

Template Based / Managed by Customer

These chatbots are built off of a template laying out questions and answers. This chatbot is quick to set up and make active, however it is only as helpful as the number of questions answered. For every question missed in the template, there is a matching unsatisfied visitor. Managing the updates to the template can be time consuming in the beginning until the majority of questions are covered.

Search Engine / Managed and Unmanaged.

These chatbots echo search bars. When a question or key word is entered, a search engine looks across the designated website to find an answer and then provides a link. Very similar to search bars, these chatbots don't really answer questions but help the visitor get to a webpage where the answer is located.

Combination Template & Search / Managed and Unmanaged.

This chatbot backs up the unanswered questions with a search option minimizing the unanswered ones.

AI enhanced multi-leveled chatbots / Managed.

These fully managed chatbots incorporate all of the above features, and then some. Besides having all of the known questions covered and a search engine backup, the right AI engine will remember new key words and questions and have the new answers ready to go the next time a similar question is asked. Additionally, these chatbots can managed a chain of questions that can lead the visitor to the exact website location that applies to them. This type of chatbot needs to be continually managed, and while more expensive, saves time and stress from the customer.

The Conclusion: *What to look for in a Government website chatbot*

As most Government Agencies are resource tight and often have a high level of staff turnover, it's best to get a fully managed SaaS AI chatbot, that is compatible with existing applications and security requirements, and is from a reputable government supplier. Additional considerations include analytics and reporting; multi-language support; multi-platform support; Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG); and add on digital services.

About OSaaS Outreach Solutions as a Service

Outreach Solutions as a Service LLC (OSaaS), is a Sacramento -based California Small Business with unmatched credentials and experience providing applications and managed services for Government Organizations in California and across the United States. Some of the award -winning public sector managed AI chatbots provided by OSaaS LLC during the pandemic include:

California Complete Count – Census 2020

San Joaquin County Chatbot

California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA)

Judicial Council of California (JCC) – Ability to Pay