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(BRIGHT IDEA)

CUSTOMER SERVICE, WITH A SMILE

EVEN AVATARS can get emotional, it seems. At least, that's what Human Interactivity believes. The Kirkland-based company is betting it can bring more lifelike behavior to artificial intelligence. Or, more specifically, it wants to bring a smiling, talking and interactive human face to those digital representatives of human beings found in online games, websites and customer service portals throughout the internet.

"Our belief is that in the future you will be having conversations with virtual people," says CEO Lonnie Benson, who was also the founder of Who's Calling Inc., a Texas-based company that produces customer relationship and sales management technology. "The technology has arrived."

Humanity Interactive's plan is to embed micro-expressions into the facial responses of avatars. The company's software can record someone's face, read the minute expressions and muscle movements, and apply those changes to what might otherwise resemble little more than well-drawn cartoon characters.

In other words, when you complain about your bill to a virtual agent, that avatar might be able to express what will look like real sympathy.

Already, a variety of com-

panies employ avatars in customer relationship management programs. Alaska Airlines' virtual assistant "Jen" has taken about 3.5 million questions in her first year of service. Type in a complaint, such as "You lost my bags!" and Jen replies, relaying a list of phone numbers to call for assistance.

What Jen doesn't do, however, is empathize. She wears the same smile regardless of how upset or ebullient the questioner.

Combine that interaction with text-to-speech conversion and you get what Benson believes will be a powerful tool for customer relationship management and for sales. That's because, notes Benson, people inherently trust avatars more than they trust real people. Humans have evolved to respond positively to certain facial stimuli—such as a smile. And Benson and his team can recreate those stimuli in virtual forms.

"If a person online smiles at you, you'll smile a little bit," says Benson. "Text is cool, but quite frankly, words are not enough. We want that emotion."

Incorporating emotion and text-to-speech interactivity into customer service may also be more cost-effective. According to Forrester Research, the cost of the average web self-service session—going one-on-one with a virtual agent—is \$1. E-mail responses cost \$10 on average, and a telephone conversation averages \$33 a call.

Now three years old, Humanity Interactive now has its first official client, a company from Venezuela.

— Julie H. Case