If I can make you smile, I can change the way you think

By Lonnie Benson
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Even if you have a great web site, there are limits to how much it can actually you help grow your business. That's because as wonderful as the web is, it's still no substitute for human interaction.

What if I told you that now you can have your cake and eat it too?

You can have a smiling, talking, interactive human face on your web site. Thanks to recent leaps in artificial intelligence and digital imaging technology, the "virtual rep" is no longer a science fiction fantasy – it's a cost-effective, user-friendly business tool.

Big organizations such as Ikea, Alaska Airlines and the U.S. Army routinely use these virtual reps, also known as "avatars," to enhance the impact of their web sites and to improve the overall quality of their interactions with the public.

As the co-founder of Who's Calling, I know the difference between technology that works and technology that doesn't. Virtual reps are not only the wave of the future, they can help you today to grow your business, improve your CSI scores and accelerate your sales processes.

Here's why: Unlike the text and image on traditional web pages, virtual reps actually form emotional bonds with visitors to your site. When a virtual rep asks you to fill out a form or pick up the phone to call a sales consultant at your store, you are far more likely to respond positively than if you were just reading the same request.

This isn't some kind of trick. All of us respond more positively to smiling, talking human faces because we are biologically hard-wired to respond instantly to human facial expressions – even when the facial expression comes from a moving digital image.

When that moving digital image is backed up by some of the most sophisticated artificial intelligence software currently available, the combination is virtually irresistible.

Virtual reps are great for engaging customers, collecting contact information and initiating customer action, such as making that all-important phone call.

Here's the really beautiful part: Your virtual reps aren't confined to your web site. You can deploy them in a wide range of marketing tactics, including email, banner advertising and mobile messaging.

Best of all, virtual reps attract and engage customers by offering something that's new and unique. They're not meant as replacements for live salespeople. They're friendly, welcoming faces that draw customers into your showroom faster and more effectively than a web page.

Because virtual reps are programmed to act and sound like regular people, they are far better at initiating potential customer relationships than any form of text. Their advantages are especially apparent in the retail automotive space, where trust is a crucial component in every deal.

The ability of virtual reps to inspire feelings of trust is perhaps their greatest business value. I personally believe that in early stages of the sales process, a virtual reps can be more effective than a live sales rep – precisely because the virtual rep has been programmed to act in a completely trustworthy manner and is incapable of acting otherwise.

But now you owe it to yourself to do some research into this exciting next phase of interactive technology. Search for terms such as "virtual representatives," "avatars," "artificial intelligence" and "veepers." You'll discover a whole new universe of "futuristic" sales and marketing tools that are ready to start working for you today.

-- Lonnie Benson is founder and CEO of Humanity Online (www.humanityonline.com) and its sister company, Amy Auto LLP (www.amyauto.com). He is the co-founder of Who's Calling and other visionary organizations dedicated to accelerating sales processes, improving profitability and enhancing customer experiences.