Chatbot Buyer's Guide:

Benefits of Collaborating with a Conversational AI Specialist

Comparing specialist solutions with add-on bots from

live chat, contact centre, & CRM vendors

When it comes to customer service and employee support, chatbot and conversational AI solutions are top of mind. It seems that every enterprise already has one, is planning to deploy one, or is exploring the possibility of incorporating one into their strategy. Many live chat, contact centre, and CRM vendors have jumped on this growing interest as an opportunity to sell their own 'add-on bot' as part of their product offering.

In a market that was already oversaturated with poor performing chatbot products, this is creating even more confusion for buyers. It is also creating a starker divide between vendors selling these add-on bots and vendors that are conversational AI specialists.

A conversational AI specialist is a vendor with an established history of delivering successful virtual agent and chatbot solutions. Their core product is their conversational AI platform, and they are moving the technology forward with dedicated development teams and innovative deployments. They have a focus on creating successful self-service experiences through tightly integrated, personalised conversational engagement. Their technology uses artificial intelligence to improve solutions in an accurate, reliable way that gives organisations full control.

If you are considering the purchase of an add-on bot from a live chat, contact centre, or CRM vendor or are evaluating conversational AI solutions, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I looking for a chatbot that will deliver high rates of self-service resolution and containment to reduce my support costs and alleviate pressure on live agents?
- Am I looking to deliver a personalised self-service experience that goes beyond just a basic FAQ bot?
- Am I looking for a platform that fits with a composable business approach and can easily integrate with my current backend systems so I can respond to market changes with agility?
- Am I looking for a solution that offers me scalability, flexibility, and lots of customisation?
- Am I looking to deploy a solution that will deliver long-term self-service success?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then this guide is for you. It will walk you through the key differences between a solution from a conversational AI specialist and the most common add-on bots on the market today. You can also jump to the end for our quick comparison chart to help you with your evaluation and purchasing decision.

USER ENGAGEMENT

Engaging users conversationally is one of the hallmarks of a true conversational AI solution. This means that users can interact with the tool using free text or voice instead of being forced through highly scripted, menu-driven interactions.

Consider a traditional IVR – Say A for option one, say B for option two, say C for option three. A menu-driven bot is delivering that same, frustrating experience just on a digital channel. These bots force users to know – or guess – how you are categorising the information they need.

Many add-on bots are built this way because they are lacking the necessary underlying machine learning and natural language processing (NLP) technology to engage conversationally. They rely heavily on a rules-based and keyword approach instead of AI. They can't understand user intent or maintain the context of conversations.

Add-on bots are often touted as 'easy to set up' and 'easy to maintain'. That may be true because the bot only allows for a small knowledgebase with limited content. Users are forced through very linear predefined interactions and receive basic text-only answers.

Some add-on bots do claim to be backed by AI, but not all conversational AI platforms are created equal. Beware of solutions that do not give you full control over the AI, options to ensure the tool is improving in an accurate, reliable way based on user engagement, and proper content and knowledge management control.

While vendors offering an add-on bot will claim it delivers good self-service, what typically happens is the user ends up being escalated to a live agent – where you are paying to use that company's live chat or contact centre solutions.

A quality solution from a conversational AI specialist will deliver a conversational engagement through free text

or voice inputs and customised conversation flows. It will enable the use of rich media, such as diagrams, images, and videos, within answers to provide more visual support.

These more functional solutions enable users to be guided through processes step-by-step, submit forms and applications, and complete transactions. It will understand user intent, maintain the context of conversations, and capture individual pieces of relevant information with sophisticated entity extraction and slot-filling functionality.

The best conversational AI technology uses a blend of machine learning and a rules-based approach to NLP with no neural network black box. This gives you control over the AI and lets you choose when – and if – the tool will 'learn' automatically. New training data is also suggested based on how users are engaging with content.
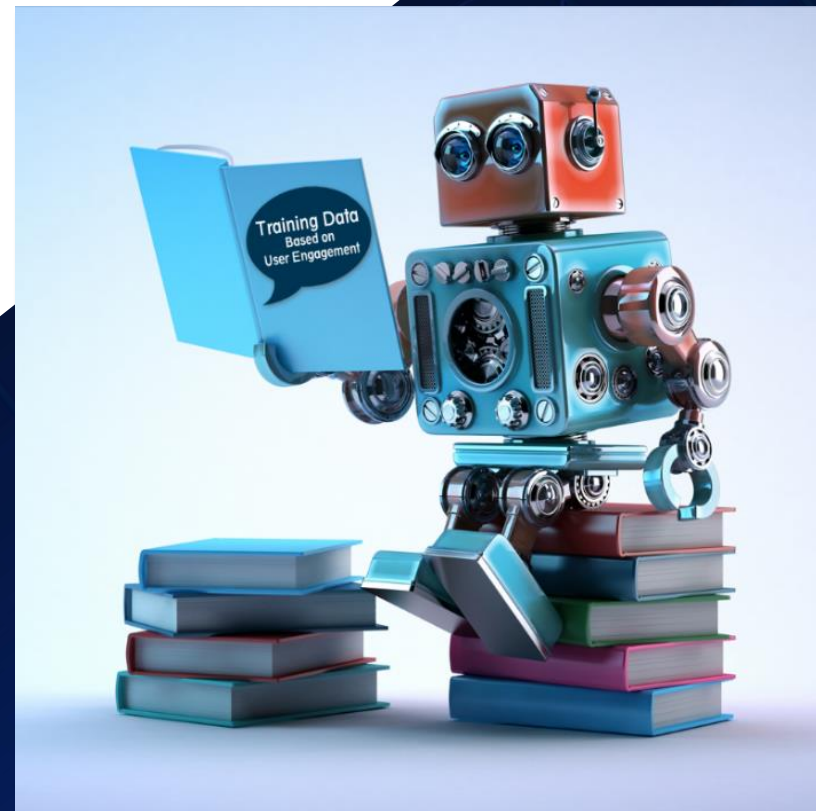
USER INTERFACE, CHANNELS, & DEVICES

When implementing any digital solution, it's important that it properly reflects your brand and is designed and optimised for the channels and devices on which it will be used.

This may sound like it should be a given for a chatbot or virtual agent offering, but when it comes to add-on bots your ability to customise your solution will be limited.

Many vendors offering add-on bots hope that the significance of the user interface (UI) is overlooked by organisations considering their tool. This is because they only offer a standard UI with very basic branding options. Every one of their implementations must use this same UI design with very minor variations, such as allowing you to select brand-specific colours. Once your bot is deployed, they make it very difficult to make any updates and don't support temporary or seasonal changes.

Conversational AI specialists know that your virtual agent or chatbot UI provides a first impression to the user about your self-service experience. Your UI should reflect your business, and you should have ownership over its design. A generic UI sets the tone for a very generic experience – which is what most add-on bots provide – and doesn't cater to how users expect to interact with your brand. A bespoke chatbot UI gives you the opportunity to differentiate the customer or employee experience from the outset.

A vendor focused specifically on conversational AI solutions can provide you with guidance for designing a customised UI through examples of current deployments, experience with how your tools will be used based on your industry or use case, and user experience best practices. They will give you full ownership and collaborate with you to design, customise, and update your UI to be in-line with your branding, specific business units or divisions, and

regional locations. You will also be able to make changes as needed for seasonal celebrations, special promotions or offers, and award wins, for example.

The customisation limitations of add-on bots can also be an issue when it comes to creating UIs that work on various channels and devices. You may not be able to optimise your UI design to accommodate the different screen size of devices or the layout of your company app. There are also often channels that aren't supported by the technology at all which will restrict how users can access your self-service. None of these limitations exist when you have full ownership over your UI design and ability to scale over multiple channels.
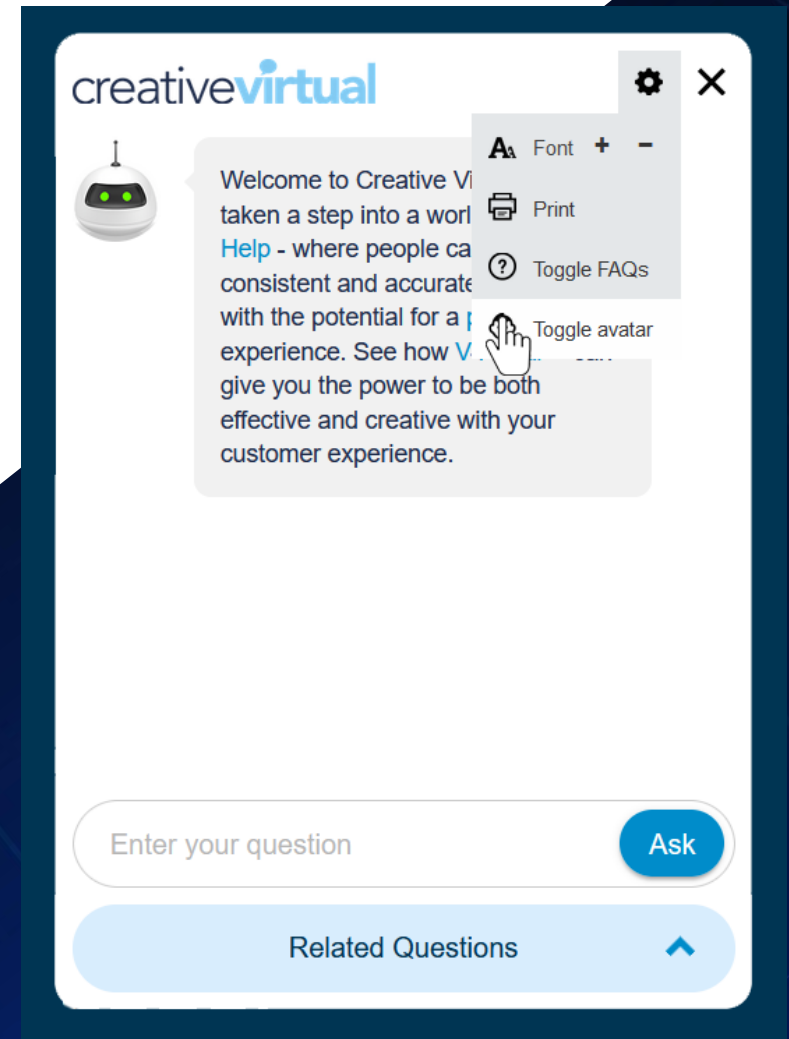
INTEGRATION

It's impossible to stress enough how important integrations are to a successful conversational AI implementation. Integration is what enables a seamless, connected, omnichannel experience. Integration is what allows for personalised engagements. Integration is what facilitates a comprehensive self–service experience.

The systems and technologies that you may consider integrating with include, but are not limited to, knowledge management platforms, ticketing systems, live chat technologies, contact centre platforms, voice systems, real-time information feeds, multiple intent engines (including transformer models such as GPT-3), CRMs, and messaging platforms.

The integration capabilities of add-on bots typically fall into two categories. The first is the add-on bot that doesn't support backend integrations or has very basic options. This lack of backend integration is often a characteristic of a simplistic bot that relies on a keyword or menu-driven approach rather than conversational AI. The platforms used to build these bots do not have the functionality to implement integration with other

systems, and the underlying technology does not support the type of interactions with users made possible by integrations. They are designed to deliver the most basic self-service on a limited scale.

The second category is the more capable add-on bot that offers support for integrations but does not deliver the flexibility to integrate with an unlimited list of systems or technologies. Often the integration options of these bots are restricted to the vendor's own products or partner technologies that are a part of their specific ecosystem or marketplace. Integration with other solutions and bespoke systems is either not possible or is very difficult and resource-intensive to implement. This means you must switch out existing solutions to the ones they support or invest extra time

and budget into attempting an unsupported integration with no guarantee that it will ultimately deliver a good experience to users.

A vendor whose core offering is their conversational AI solutions understands how important integrations are to creating the best self-service experiences and offers a platform that supports unlimited integration with other systems, platforms, and technologies. There will be a library of pre-built connectors for their most commonly used integrations and those specifically designed with partner technologies. However, organisations won't be limited to only those integrations.

This flexibility supports composable business and offers a twofold benefit to organisations. First, it eliminates the need to switch out existing solutions that are working well for your business. You can integrate your conversational AI tool with what you already have in place. Second, it gives you the flexibility and commercial freedom to change those systems any time you want without sacrificing the integration with your chatbot or virtual agent. You are never locked into a particular platform or technology just to keep your self-service experience functioning properly.

PERSONALISATION

One of the key characteristics of a quality conversational AI solution is the capability to deliver a personalised experience to users.

This requires having options to integrate with other systems and technologies. It also requires a management platform that supports features such as multiple answers for an intent and functionality to identify individual pieces of relevant user information.

For example, a customer may want to use the tool to confirm their outstanding balance and check on the due date so they can decide if they need to make a payment. For an internal employee solution, this could be a new hire needing IT support to set up applications on a new device and HR support to answer a payroll question.

An add-on bot without the proper integration and functionality won't be able to deliver this support. The best it will be able to do is tell the user where to go to find this information within their online account or escalate to a live agent for user-specific support.

Some add-on bots do offer personalisation, but only through integration with that vendor's own products or a very specific list of other solutions. This greatly restricts what type of personalisation you're able to provide. It keeps you from having a comprehensive self-service tool that is scalable across the enterprise.

On the other hand, a solution from a conversational AI specialist will enable you to create a wide range of personalised engagements with customers and employees within a single tool. The virtual agent or chatbot will know who the user is if they are already logged into their account or authenticate them if not. It will then be able to provide the user with responses personalised to them, guide them through procedures

and completion of forms, and facilitate the submission of payments and support tickets – all within the virtual agent interface.

Personalisation goes beyond just knowing an authenticated user's name and account or order details, though. It's also about personalising the experience based on their engagement channel, location, language, saved preferences, and job title or member status. This is where a feature rich conversational AI platform allows you to really customise engagements.

A platform that supports multiple answers for a single intent lets you personalise responses based on a wide variety of criteria while still managing all of the content within a single knowledgebase. For example, you can deliver different responses to a department head and a team manager or to a platinum member and a silver member when the same question is asked. You can deliver a location-specific response for things such as policy quotes and local regulations. You can deliver multi-lingual support based on profile settings and user input.

Having a conversational AI platform that supports a wide range of personalisation options empowers you to expand the self-service capabilities of your solution. This increases digital containment by delivering a comprehensive, tailored experience, improves user satisfaction, and makes the solution easier to maintain.
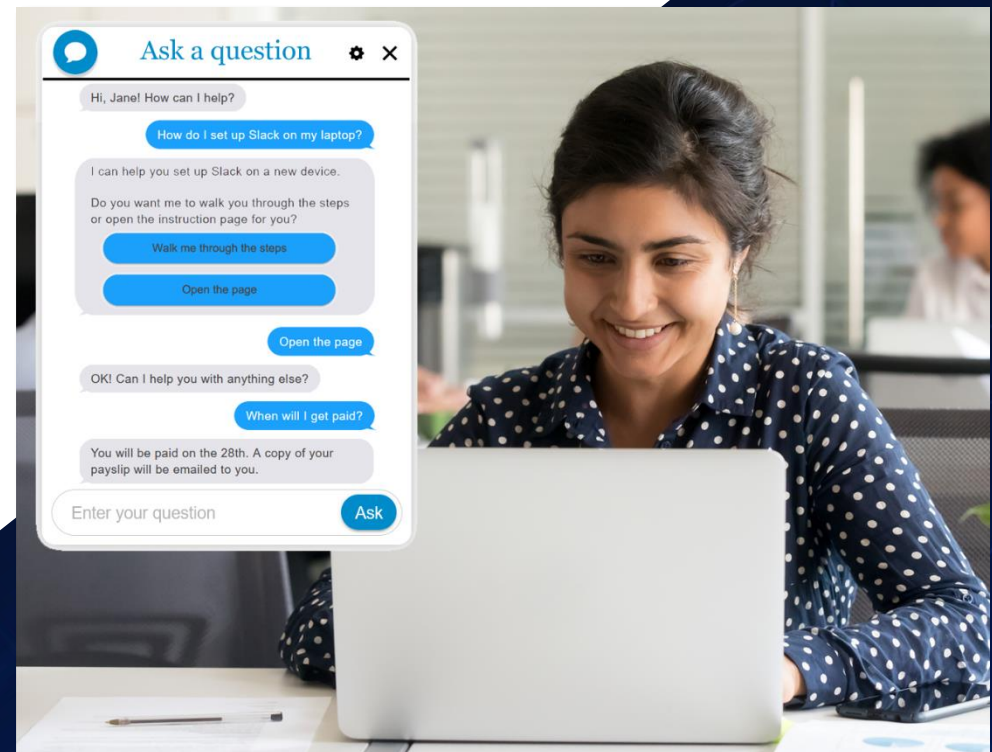
REPORTING

The only way to track the performance of a self-service tool is through the proper reporting.

This is how you evaluate user engagement, self-service containment, content performance, user satisfaction – and any other key performance indicators (KPIs) specific to your project. It requires the capturing of relevant data and a way to organise and analyse that information.

Add-on bots are often severely lacking in this area because the vendor either doesn't understand the importance of collecting the right data or hasn't invested in adding the proper reporting capabilities to their product. If you consider that the unspoken goal of an add-on bot is to *not* deliver a positive, comprehensive self-service experience and avoid escalation to a live agent, then it makes sense that there isn't proper reporting on the tool.

Typically, these bots do come with some reporting capabilities, but they are limited and disjointed from your data on other support channels. They do not

provide a full view of the performance and do not offer options for integrating with other reporting platforms or business intelligence tools you may use within your organisation. This inadequate reporting means you are not getting a complete picture of your support strategy and keeps you from being able to make informed decisions.

A conversational AI specialist not only understands the importance of complete reporting, but also recognises the rich conversational data these solutions can collect. Tracking and improving the solution's performance to meet the identified goals and benchmarks is paramount, of course. However, this rich data can also be analysed to understand your users' views, identify developing trends, and make informed predictions to contribute to areas such as product or service innovations and marketing.

A quality conversational AI product gives you access to data and analytics with both standardised and customised reporting. You can also integrate with other business intelligence platforms and take advantage of real-time data streaming. This allows for deep mining of data and supports composable business with the insights you need to identify and deliver solutions thoughtfully and quickly. It also means you have a full picture of both your conversational AI solution's individual performance as well as how it is performing in conjunction with other digital and contact centre support options.
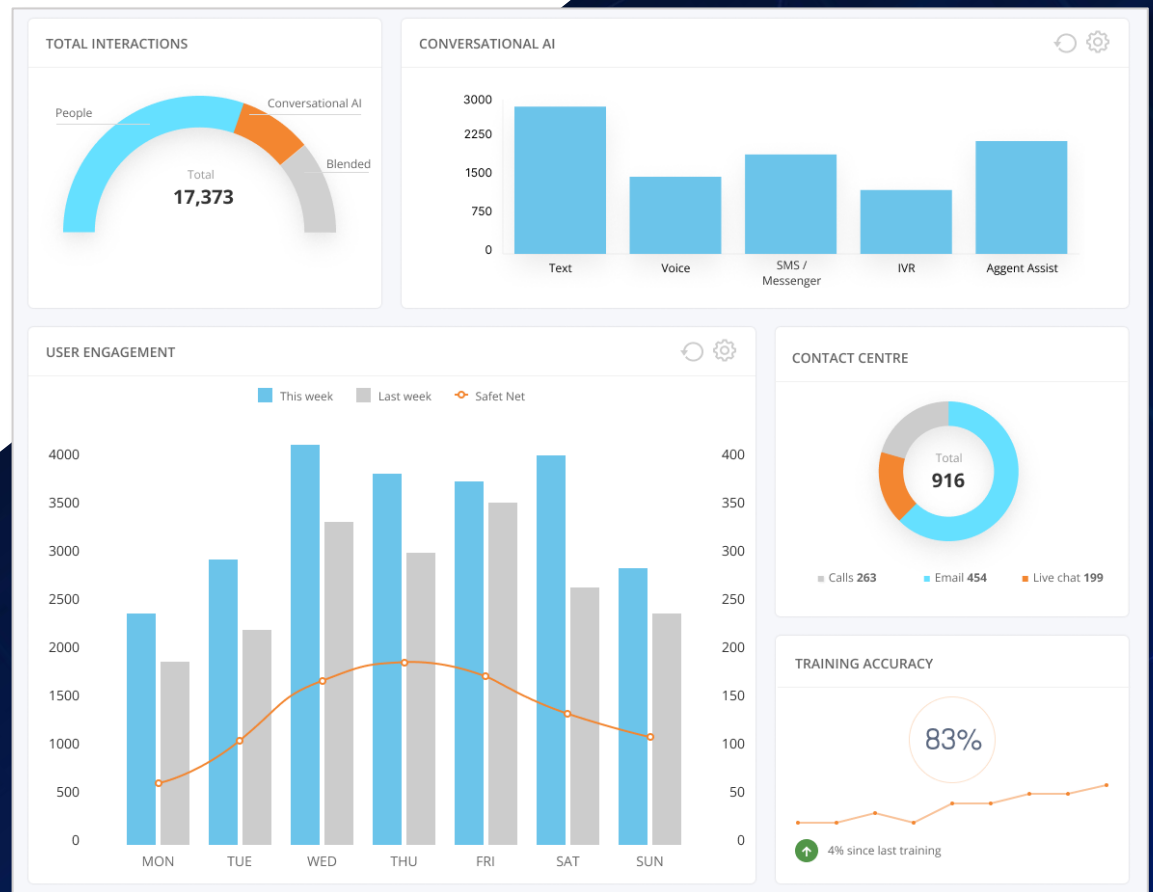
PRICING & EXPERTISE

It's not uncommon for vendors to offer an add-on bot as a free trial or for a cheaper price than a solution from a conversational AI specialist. The hope is that organisations will see it as a low-cost way to offer digital self-service that can be easily tacked on to an existing contract without really evaluating the bot's features and functionality. However, once the add-on bot is live, organisations are suddenly hit with the real cost of the tool.

Add-on bots usually have a pricing structure similar to what the vendor uses for their other solutions such as live chat in which you are charged by transaction. This is not a fair way to charge for this type of support tool and can become extremely expensive for organisations. What sounded like a 'cheap' solution to implement quickly becomes a pricey one to keep.

Add to that the cost of delivering a poor self-service experience. Users aren't getting the information and answers they need from the bot, so they are still being escalated to a human agent which costs you money. Users are left frustrated and annoyed by a bad experience, decreasing loyalty and satisfaction, and increasing customer churn which costs you money.

A solution from a conversational AI specialist may look to be more expensive on the surface but when you calculate the cost of making it part of your strategy longer term, it becomes a much more cost-effective investment. You will have a variety of pricing structures to choose from so that you can select the one that fits best with your budget and goals. Any initial development costs you incur while building a highly functional, integrated virtual agent or chatbot will quickly pay off with high rates of successful self-service resolution. User satisfaction increases and your cost for live agent support decreases.

When you collaborate with a vendor whose core product is conversational AI, you also reap immense

benefits from their expertise. They have extensive experience with the technology and know how to implement it for both quick wins and long-term success. It is much more efficient, effective, and economical to have an expert guide you through your project. You also know that they are dedicated to improving their conversational AI product to continually deliver the best results possible – it's their core focus and not just something bolted on to an existing product in order to jump on the conversational AI bandwagon.

A BUYER'S COMPARISON CHART

Below is a quick comparison chart to help you as you evaluate different chatbot and conversational AI solutions. It summarises the information from this guide into the key areas that you should consider as you make your purchasing decision.

	Conversational AI specialist	Add-on bot
Use of AI	Blend of machine learning and a rules-based approach to NLP with no neural network black box that puts you in control of the AI	Relies heavily on a rules-based and keyword approach instead of AI
Type of interactions	Conversational engagement through free text or voice inputs and custom conversation flows; Understands user intent and maintains context of conversation	Highly scripted, menu-driven interactions; Can't understand user intent
Type of responses	Text and rich media, including diagrams, images, and videos	Often text only or limited support for images
Knowledgebase & content	Knowledgebase with unlimited content and custom conversation flows that can support guidance through processes, submitting forms, and completing transactions; Full control with proper content and knowledge management workflow capabilities	Small knowledgebase with limited content and very linear, predefined interactions; Basic content management

	Conversational AI specialist	Add-on bot
System improvement	New training data suggested based on user interactions with options to decide if the tool will 'learn' automatically	Does not improve in an accurate or reliable way based on user engagement
Self-service goal	Offers comprehensive support for self-service containment and resolution, only escalating users to live support when needed or preferred	Limited self-service in order to escalate majority of users to live chat or contact centre
User interface	Fully customisable UI can be designed to reflect your branding and be updated as needed for seasonal celebrations, special promotions, limited time offers, etc.	Standard UI with basic branding options and not able to be customised or updated as needed
Channels & devices	Deploy and optimise across multiple channels and devices (including social media, SMS, messaging apps, smart speakers) with customised responses and UI design	Deployment on a select list of channels and devices with limited customisation options
Integration	Extensive library of pre-built connectors and unlimited integration with other systems, platforms, and technologies	Backend integration not supported or limited to specific systems or technologies; Can be very difficult and resource-intensive to implement
Personalisation	Easily authenticate users and deliver personalised responses based on user profile, account details, location, etc.	Little to no personalisation due to lack of integration options and limited management platform functionality

	Conversational AI specialist	Add-on bot
Reporting	Both standardised and customised reporting capabilities to track performance and analyse rich conversational data	Limited reporting that is disjointed from other support channels
Pricing	Variety of pricing options available; High self-service containment and resolution reduces costs of live agent channels	Pricing structures that charge by transaction are expensive; Most users still escalated to more costly live agent channels
Development & maintenance	Expert team makes project more efficient, effective, and economical; Focus on improving product to deliver real business benefits	Lack of expertise with initial development and ongoing maintenance; Focus is on other core products instead of on improving the bot offering

About Creative Virtual

Creative Virtual is a conversational AI specialist recognised in the industry for our two decades of experience and unmatched expertise. Our success lies in the ability of our highly experienced team to deliver best practice insights alongside our award-winning technology. We collaborate with organisations around the world to improve their customer, employee, and contact centre experiences with customised chatbot, virtual agent, and live chat solutions. Our clients rely on us as a trusted partner for developing and delivering effective conversational AI strategies.

Learn more and schedule a conversational AI consultation with our expert team:

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