

Public relations scholar explores the use of AI-driven chatbots for PR

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Credit: University of Florida

Building upon her background in corporate communication research, Public Relations Associate Professor Rita Men went into high gear during the pandemic to study effective communications from CEOs as

well as chatbots used for social listening.

In collaboration with Public Relations Department Chair Marcia DiStaso, Men developed a model to find out how executives were communicating with their employees to maintain their trust, build relationships, engage them and help improve their feeling of wellbeing during the pandemic.

The model examined leaders' transparency, authenticity, empathy and optimism in communications "and how that can help reduce employees' feelings of uncertainty and boost employee trust and engagement during the pandemic," she said.

The team surveyed more than 1,000 employees from a variety of industries to assess executive leadership communication and how effective it was. The ability to instill trust and confidence, and offer hope were traits the best communicators exhibited.

It's not much different with chatbots and other artificial intelligence technology being used on a daily basis now: The most effective ones are those that most sound and act like humans, Men said. But the question for businesses is: Is AI worth the investment?

Men has been studying the value of using social chatbots for public relations purposes, and how businesses can use them to build long-term, more personalized relationships with customers that in turn increase trust toward the company.

In a two-stage study, Men and her colleagues reviewed the list of companies on the Fortune 100 list and then went to Facebook to see which ones had chatbots. "We tested them and rated them on a scale of 1 to 3" to find the five that performed well in [different industries](#). Domino's Pizza is doing a great job, she said.

They then asked more than 1,000 consumers to have a five-minute conversation with one of the five companies that was randomly selected for each person. Follow-up questions included whether the conversation sounded authentic, how they would evaluate the quality of the conversation and whether the [chatbot](#) affected their relationship with the brand.

"Our hypothesis was supported," and chatbots have value, Men said. "Social presence and the conversational human voice of the chatbot can improve their listening ability, which in turn will affect the public perception of the transparency of the company, their trust, and their satisfaction and commitment to the company."

When chatbots sound more human, including making conversations more positive by using humor and addressing questions, they help build relationships with the user, Men said.

In the second stage, they are recruiting respondents who are customers for an experiment in which they are controlling some conditions, such as whether conversations sound more machine like or more human like. The goal will be to find out what type of messaging should be used to improve the relationship between companies and the public.

"Companies are not always using AI effectively, which leads to negative effects" like chatbots not answering or sounding like a machine, thereby hurting relationships with customers, she said. But, there are ways to train chatbots to be effective communicators by working with IT people. "There are ways to make chatbots have a PR mindset. They are available 24/7 and are very responsive, so there are a lot of advantages and they can really reduce the human cost."

An effective conversation with a chatbot can improve public perception, Men said. When businesses are "upfront with new technology, are more

trendy, more competent, more agreeable, friendly, it can help a relationship and enhance a positive image in the eyes of stakeholders."

A researcher, author, speaker and consultant, as well as an associate professor, Men's research interests include internal communication, leadership communication, [relationship](#)/reputation management, emerging technologies and entrepreneurial communications. An alumna of the University of Miami, Hong Kong Baptist University and Zhejiang University, she worked for the Institute for Public Relations, Southern Methodist University, Ketchum Inc. and the Alibaba Group before arriving at the College. She's had more than 70 publications and has been honored more than 20 times.

She follows her own research when teaching her capstone and graduate-level PR classes. "This world is changing every day. We have seen how much technology has affected the public relations industry and business environment."

She tells students to be open-minded and have a humble heart and learning attitude. "I advise them to be themselves. Be authentic. Everyone else is taken. Have confidence in what they have learned, their strengths, their skill sets, their training, their background."

She's been amazed at how resilient the CJC students have been. "The pandemic is a challenge for many people. After I saw their delivery of their final project, I was really amazed by how resilient they are, their strength, their perseverance."

Provided by University of Florida

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