

A.I. in the driver's seat with the enterprise

Artificial intelligence will be a critical driver of U.S. economy. See what IBM's Watson is doing at GlaxoSmithKline, Staples and 1-800-Flowers

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With IBM's Watson, GlaxoSmithKline tackles sniffle and cough questions

IBM's artificial intelligence to find answers to your sniffly, coughy questions

Sharon Gaudin | [Computerworld](#)

If you start feeling a cold or flu coming on this season, you will be able to reach out to IBM's artificial intelligence-fueled Watson to find some answers to your sniffly, coughy questions.

[GlaxoSmithKline](#), (GSK) the world's sixth-largest pharmaceutical company, is teaming up with IBM to use Watson to better connect with customers.

The London-based company plans to start using Watson Ads in November, enabling people to ask questions by voice or text right through GSK's online ads.

Jason Andree, senior brand manager of the Cough and Cold division of GlaxoSmithKline North America, will announce the move at the start of the [IBM World of Watson](#) conference in Las Vegas.

IBM's Watson system first earned its fame in 2011 when it [took on the game show Jeopardy's human champions](#) in a well-publicized man-vs-machine dust up.

Since then, Watson has gone from playing games to [being used in healthcare](#), finance, education, [retail](#) and research.

"Any time you get sick, it's a very personal experience," Andree told *Computerworld*. "Watson provides a very personalized experience.... If you're sick, through Watson, you can ask a question and it will provide a personalized response."

As the cold and flu season arrives, GSK is rolling out the Watson-based question and answer feature first for its Theraflu cold and flu medication. If it works out well, Andree said the company will likely roll it out for Flonase during the 2017 allergy season.

"It's very cutting edge and I'm very proud that Theraflu is able to participate in this," he said. "I really think, for us, at the heart of it we're trying to provide the right information for our consumers and that will result in a deeper relationship with our customers.... The intent is not to replace a human aspect or consulting a physician. This is for the individual searching the web and getting them an immediate answer."

Once the feature is up and running, users will be able to ask the company - right through its ads - questions like, "How do I treat my cough?" or "Where can I find a medication to treat a runny nose?"

With Watson's natural language capabilities, along with A.I. and machine learning, customers should get quick and accurate answers to their questions.

"You won't have to go online and do a search and go through the results to find what you want," said Andree. "It's very interactive.... At first, it will give you a quick response and then it will [help with] follow-up questions. It's not going to diagnose you, but it can provide information about what store they need. It can provide a coupon for what they need and it can direct them to pages in the website for more information."

Andree noted that using A.I. to connect with potential customers not only helps GSK stand out in a cluttered pharmaceutical market, but is also a way to better understand customers.

"It's learning on the fly," he said. "Right now, one of the day-to-day ways we interact with consumers is with the customer hotline where people can call in and ask questions. Today it's very limited in what we learn.... Consumers will applaud and appreciate brands that get them. I'm hoping this is something customers take away - being where they need us to be."

The IBM World of Watson conference is expected to spotlight how A.I. - and specifically Watson - can affect industries, customer relations and the Internet of Things.

Staples develops an office competitor to Amazon Echo and Google Home

The office supply company turns its Easy Button into a device that will be the assistant's assistant

Sharon Gaudin | Computerworld

While the [Amazon Echo](#) and [Google Home](#) brought the digital assistant to the home, Staples wants to do the same for the office.

To do so, the office supply chain store is bringing its iconic Easy Button to life.

Massachusetts-based [Staples](#) is testing a smart assistant device that looks like its Easy Button, which was launched as a marketing campaign and gained a bit of a cult following, but that customers can use to order products, track shipments and help with returns.

One day, according to Staples' chief digital officer Faisal Masud, the device, backed by artificial intelligence-based IBM Watson, will also be able to call up janitorial services, make restaurant reservations, check traffic and weather, set reminders, act as an alarm clock and play the radio.



Staples

Staples is converting its well-known Easy Button into an office digital assistant

"We want to be the assistant's assistant," Masud told *Computerworld* in an interview at the IBM World of Watson conference in Las Vegas. "Offices are going to evolve, and these services and products shouldn't be more than a click away. I need the carpets cleaned, the windows cleaned. I

need reservations for the boss at a restaurant... It will be for more than ordering pens and pencils."

Staples's smart office assistant will go into alpha testing with five to 10 customers by the end of the year. It's scheduled to go into a larger beta test with about 100 large customers in the first quarter of next year.

Depending on the results of those two tests, the Easy Button device could be released in the second or third quarter of 2017, Masud said.

Initially, the device will be focused on ordering products, returns and tracking orders, but Staples has a bigger roadmap planned for it.

As new versions of the product are released, the Easy Button is expected to gain more abilities. Users will be able to ask it for the weather forecast or traffic advisories, to make dinner reservations for the CEO, or call a repair service to fix the coffee machine in the break room or to have the office carpets cleaned.

Eventually, Masud expects it to be 4G-enabled so it won't need to connect to Wi-Fi.

It's about getting ahead of, or at least keeping up with, the growing trend toward conversational commerce, which refers to interacting with companies in new ways, like messaging, voice commands and chat apps.

"Conversational commerce is here already, and we need to play a role in it," Masud said. "I think it's less about [gaining] advantage over competitors. It's about where the market is going. Conversational commerce is the future. You won't be tied to the screen. We believe we need to give customers choices. It could make us more competitive, but that's not the reason we're doing it."

IBM Watson, which gained fame in a 2011 man-versus-machine matchup with game show *Jeopardy* contestants, has gone on to be used in the financial industry, academic research and health care.

For Masud, it's a natural for retail, as well, by providing companies with a system that knows their entire inventory of products and their customers' needs, as well.

"This is really very easy for Watson, so using it makes sense," said Ezra Gottheil, an analyst with Technology Business Research. "It's a good idea. However, unless and until it has more services, it's just a smart Easy Button, but that is worthwhile, too, if ordering supplies is your job."

Patrick Moorhead, an analyst with Moor Insights & Strategy, said the Watson part of this device will have to work really well or users will be disappointed and frustrated.

"It has to be more precise than the consumer Echo because we are talking about business, not fun," he said, adding that it's wise for Staples to roll out services gradually. "It should allow them to work it out over time but, again, business people are impatient and it needs to be done quickly."

The Easy Button device is one of the ways that Staples executives want customers to be able to connect with the retailer.

While customers can still walk into the company's more than 3,000 stores worldwide, they also can make orders by phone, through a mobile smart app, over Facebook Messenger and with a Slackbot.

The Easy Button device, though, is designed to take customer service to a new level – an artificial intelligence-fueled level of customer connection.

"You say, 'I want to place an order for paper.' It will look up what paper you ordered before and say, 'Is this what you want?' Then you approve it and it's done," Masud said. "Today, if you look at the life of folks interacting with us, we don't want them spending any time dealing with friction, like calling to check in on their order or figuring out what they should buy. We want that to be seamless."

Masud doesn't see Staples' device as a competitor to the Echo or Google Home.

"We don't think it's a competitor because we won't be in homes at all," he said. "This is a highly functional device for the office. We are focused on the assistant or the procurement manager."

Masud said office assistants and managers will be freed up by having the Easy Button device handle the brunt of their ordering and delivery tracking, so they can work on more complicated and important tasks.

"Watson can address more questions from customers quickly," he added. "Now people aren't holding on the phone, or exchanging emails or wasting time somehow. We want to incorporate services into all of this. We have business cards and copy and print services. Those are a little fragmented to the customer and now they'll be unified by the Easy Button. We want to make office management a lot easier."

1-800-Flowers wants to transform its business with A.I.

A company focused on change uses IBM Watson to connect with customers

Executives at 1-800-Flowers.com expect a new wave in artificial intelligence technology will help to change their business so much it'll be like running a brand new business.

"We are on the cusp of a change as big as when e-commerce hit," said Chris McCann, president and CEO of 1-800-Flowers.com. "It's giving us the opportunity to have such deep relationships

with our customers that it'll be like the company hasn't existed before. It can change our market, our supply chain. Everything. It will drive change all through the company."

That's big talk from a businessman who knows about transformative change. After all, 1-800-Flowers.com already has transformed itself several times.

The company, a floral and gourmet food gift retailer with more than 4,000 employees, was founded in 1976 when McCann's brother James started a flower shop. The business did well so he opened more.

In the mid-1980s, McCann was on board and got behind the idea of ordering products over the phone. He shrunk the business from 12 brick-and-mortar stores to three, focused on telephone sales and created the brand known so well today.

That was the first transformation.

In the 1990s, they began looking at online sales, creating a presence on AOL in 1994 and launching its first website on Netscape in 1995.

That was the second transformation.

"I used to say '90 to '97 was some of the most fun times of my career because it allowed me to experiment with lots of emerging technologies," McCann told *Computerworld* in an interview at the [IBM World of Watson conference](#) here this week. "We're not smart enough to predict what technologies will take hold, but we need to be there so when the consumer decides what they want, we'll be ready."

In the mid-2000s, the company jumped into social media and mobile technology, launching an ultimately unsuccessful store called Second Life, along with a successful Twitter presence, Facebook page and mobile app.

The ways in which 1-800-Flowers.com connects with customers, sells its products and promotes its brand continue to change.

"We foster a culture of innovation," McCann said. "In 2008, we were having layoffs, but I said we are cutting costs in many different places but we also are investing in the future. One of those was investing in mobile. Not everybody agreed with me. It's the future. We need to stay with it."

The trends that McCann sees changing his business yet again are conversational commerce and big data, analytics and cognitive computing.

Conversational commerce is a fairly new term in which companies use artificial intelligence to interact with customers using voice commands, text and chat apps.

At IBM World of Watson, there's a lot of discussion about conversational commerce, since companies like 1-800-Flowers.com and [Staples](#), are talking about how IBM's artificial intelligence system can help them make sense of an increasing flood of data, while answering customers' questions, taking their orders and helping them feel more connected to their brand.

“Last January I was at a meeting sharing articles about A.I.,” said McCann. “I said it’s time to get in. We can’t wait any longer. In April, we launched our first commerce bot in Facebook Messenger. Then we launched on Amazon Echo.”

Then, going all in, they launched a beta version of an IBM Watson-powered digital gift concierge in early May.

The concierge -- named GWYN, for Gifts When You Need – takes customers’ questions and offers suggestions for products, from all the brands the company offers, that might meet their needs.

A customer, for example, might need a birthday gift for his dad, who is trying to keep on a healthy diet. GWYN might suggest a box of Harry & David gourmet pears.

For an Easter gift for your mother, GWYN might suggest several floral bouquets.

“The challenge we have had is how do we get consumers to know that we can solve more of their gifting needs than just flowers,” McCann said “When they have other gifting needs, they go somewhere else. GWYN helps the customer find what they need while looking across all of our offerings and brands.”

GWYN also helps 1-800-Flowers.com remain on the leading edge of retail.

“GWYN positions us at the forefront of this new emerging world of technology that, in no question in my mind, will change consumer behavior,” added McCann. “In the early 90s, we saw the technology changing. We didn’t know where it would go but we wanted to be ready so we could learn and grow along with the consumer. We want to do that again.”

The company launched GWYN on its website in May in what was called a very early beta. A second beta, launched about three weeks ago, will run through the holiday season, providing information on how well the service works, what customers like about it and what changes they may need to make.

McCann said he expects an official version of GWYNN will launch in the first quarter of 2017. There are no plans for a GWYN app, but the company is considering it.

The company is focused on adding to the GWYN features it already has, enabling it to one day offer users reminders about birthdays and anniversaries.

McCann said the company considered other A.I. platforms but went with IBM Watson because it was “out in front” of competitors and had more capabilities.

Arnie Leap, CIO of 1-800-Flowers.com, said he’s excited to see the company make this change with A.I.

“It allows the company’s culture to embrace creativity,” he said. “We have to make sure our supply chain is working but we have to step back and engage in projects like this to make sure the company goes forward.”

