

‘Alexa, ask Allstate’

Launch of Amazon Alexa capability helps Allstate connect with customers in new ways

Editor’s note: Written by Maggie Cagney as part of the Allstate NOW team

When Amazon started selling its voice assistant devices, it opened its developer portal to anyone – and Allstate’s Mobile Center of Excellence team jumped at the opportunity. Allstate knew the cloud-based devices could provide consumers a hands-free way to interact with their insurance companies, and it wanted to be one of the first to offer the new service.

Last month, they got there: On Feb. 22, Allstate announced the launch of its Amazon Alexa capability, allowing customers to access account information and helping consumers locate a nearby Allstate agency. Let’s look at how they did it.

Eric Grant, senior manager of the MCOE, said Amazon lets businesses and developers create software that works on its hardware – so companies like Allstate can provide voice services and capabilities that customers will find useful.

“We’re not trying out new technologies just to prototype them,” Grant said. “We’re actually consuming new technologies in order to yield immediate value. I encourage our developers to think differently: Don’t just put on your Allstate hat; put on your startup hat. If you were at a startup company, what technologies would you use? Those are things we should explore.”

Last fall, the team started with Alexa, Amazon’s voice service that allows customers to instantly play music and get information, news, weather and more – all through speech recognition. Customers with an Alexa device, such as Amazon Echo or a Fire TV device, can “ask Alexa” a question or give a command and the device responds.

What would it take to build a model for Alexa? What voice services would Allstate customers find useful? Is it a secure way for a customer to find billing information? In less than six weeks, the developers on Grant’s team not only had answers, they had created an account-specific capability for Alexa.

Allstate wasn’t the only financial firm in this space: Fidelity and Capital One had created similar voice capabilities where customers could use Alexa to look up banking information. But, Allstate was the first insurance company to create a capability linking a customers’ account information, introducing a new, helpful way to interact with insurance.

“Everyone runs in a pack in financial services,” said Mike Antognoli, senior manager, Mobile e-Business Marketing. “Not only is it good for our brand to be out there – and among the first – but it’s also low-cost innovation for us.”

The MCOE team’s speed and agility allowed the Allstate Alexa skill to launch in a matter of months, but Grant said it was also due to the resources already in place. Grant’s team leveraged existing information and authentication from applications used today, like

MyAccount and Allstate Mobile. This allowed for a simpler – and quicker – development process.

“Some of the folks on our team are able to do the development from beginning to end,” Grant said, “and that makes a big difference. From a speed and cost perspective, it allows us to tackle projects and achieve benefit very quickly. Like with Alexa, we can go and create something very quickly, try it out, and see if it’s a viable technology or solution.”

As the team worked to create a hands-free solution for Amazon, Grant said they had to address one challenge upfront: data security. Amazon requires a high security standard, and since Alexa is linked to an Allstate customers’ account, the team had to build an extra layer of security to ensure customer information is protected.

“Each person on our team is empowered to make decisions,” Grant said. “If they don’t know something, they are encouraged to figure it out. We want to continue to leverage the speed and capability of this team.”

Antognoli said the team isn’t stopping with Amazon: They have already begun to explore low-cost opportunities where Allstate can continue to promote the brand – and protect customers in new ways. As the marketplace changes and more and more companies join the space of “conversational commerce,” the team is building out its roadmap, looking at additional voice services to connect with customers through apps like Facebook and Google.

“We’re stepping up our game,” Antognoli said. “We’re extending our capabilities in other places, especially where there are a lot of people: Facebook, Apple and Google. If they’re doing something, we should pay attention to what it is – and maybe, do it too.”

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Sidebar: What is Alexa?

Meet Alexa, Amazon’s cloud-based “virtual assistant” that enables customers to interact with devices in a more intuitive way: using voice. Customers with an Amazon device, like an Amazon Echo or Fire TV, can ask a question or give a command, and Alexa will respond instantly.

Allstate recently released a new account-specific capability, or skill, for Alexa. Now, customers can enable the Allstate skill and get key information specific to their accounts by saying, “Alexa, ask Allstate...” to:

- Find out the balance and due date of an auto insurance bill
- Find an agency owner using zip code search
- Find contact information for the agency owner associated with the user’s account

“Allstate has a history of innovation, and consumers expect that to continue from us,” Roger Tye, vice president, Digital and User Experience, said in a [press release](#). “Amazon's innovation with Alexa provided a great avenue for us to connect with our customers in a delightful way, providing them useful information when, where and how they want it.”

To find out more about the Allstate capability for Amazon, click [here](#).