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Chatbots, anyone? Tennis not alone; others take a look

Move over Siri and Alexa, there's a new chatbot in town. Meet Fred, the Wimbledon tennis tournament's own artificial intelligence assistant embedded in its mobile app.

Wimbledon is the latest sports brand to use chatbots, or voice-activated digital assistants, to interact with fans. Wimbledon organizers just introduced Fred, named after late British tennis legend Fred Perry, in time for the 2017 event in July.

Fred is a chatbot assistant similar to Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri that, among other things, allowed fans viewing the play live at the All England Lawn Tennis Club to ask it (him?) questions and get help finding their way around the facility.

Built into popular messaging apps, chatbots are giving sports teams and brands the ability to interact directly with their fans. Chatbots can also send messages and alerts, answer questions and sell tickets and merchandise, among other uses. Sports organizations like the National Basketball Association and theScore, a mobile-focused sports media company, use Facebook Messenger chatbots for example.

Wimbledon, one of the most venerable and tradition-steeped sports institutions in the world, doesn't seem like the most likely candidate to be an early adopter of this technology. Yet tournament organizers have been actively boosting the event's digital presence to appeal to younger audiences, and they aren't stopping at collecting old-school Facebook page "likes" and Twitter followers.

In addition to debuting Fred for an enhanced Wimbledon experience, the organizers are also responding to fans' increasing desire to watch matches and highlights through the organization's mobile app.

At the moment, visitors to the Wimbledon website far outnumber those opting to use the mobile app — 93 percent to 7 percent — according to Marketing Week. But tournament organizers reported the number of its mobile users

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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tripled in 2016, so serving up additional app functions like Fred could be a good investment going forward.

Fred is expected to follow in the footsteps of more established chatbots like Siri and Alexa by expanding its question-and-answer repertoire and becoming more intuitive. Eventually, Fred is expected to be able to give answers to questions about everything from the history of Wimbledon and its players to the day's weather.

Fred is powered by Watson, an artificial intelligence agent created by IBM, a longtime Wimbledon partner. IBM has sponsored the tennis tournament since 1990 and piloted new Watson applications at the tournament in recent years, according to Bloomberg.

Fred was just one of a variety of Watson-powered projects IBM introduced at Wimbledon this year, including a system that automatically compiled highlight reels for matches on several courts based in part on the noise of crowd reactions and the number of social media posts during the matches.

Tennis isn't the only sport jumping on the chatbot bandwagon. The tech-savvy NBA is embracing chatbots from the league level down to individual players.

As The Wall Street Journal noted, Facebook introduced chatbot capability in April 2016, and the NBA quickly jumped on the new opportunity by launching its own chatbot specifically for the championship finals that June.

Using Facebook Messenger, fans could ask the NBA chatbot, created by WSC Sports Technologies, for highlights featuring any player on the two teams in the finals.

At the team level, the 2017 championship-winning Golden State Warriors launched its Warriors Playoffs Assistant in time for the playoffs this year, allowing fans to ask questions about parking and traffic at the Oakland-based team's home games as well as directions to various amenities at the Warriors' Oracle Arena, Sports Illustrated reported.

The Warriors, which are partnering with Chatfuel on their Facebook Messenger chatbot, expect information about game schedules, player injuries and statistics to be available through the chatbot in the near future.

Chatbots also present a novel opportunity for athletes and others to interact with fans. Retired point guard Gary Payton, who played for the Warriors and Seattle Supersonics, among other teams, is a great example of a sports figure capitalizing on his persona to create a lively chatbot experience.

Payton's chatbot, developed by GameOn and called "Trash Talk With Gary Payton," draws on his mouthy reputation to give fans commentary, news, scores and additional content including live video via Facebook Messenger, Skype and Kik, according to Adweek.

Payton, an investor in GameOn,

is also partnering with menswear brand DXL and uses his chatbot to promote the retailer through messages and links.

Sports media is also dabbling in the emerging technology. News company theScore uses Facebook Messenger chatbots to deliver automated scores and breaking news alerts from the NFL, MLB, NBA and NHL, to fans. The mobile-focused theScore first launched its chatbot in June 2016 to extend the way it delivers news and data.

With Facebook Messenger used by more than 900 million people, the platform was a natural choice over other messaging options, according to theScore. Users can also tailor the information they receive by sport and more recent news.

Chatbots are a good bet for forward-thinking sports organizations and individuals for a number of reasons.

For one thing, the most popular messaging apps have hundreds of millions of monthly active users. Messaging apps have become so popular, in fact, that the total combined number of users of the top four messenger apps (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat and Viber) is bigger than the top four social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn), according to Business Insider.

And the younger audiences coveted by advertisers and brands are flocking to messaging apps due, at least in part, to cheaper mobile devices, lower data plan prices and better features. So far messaging apps also tend to have higher retention and usage rates than most mobile apps, according to Business Insider.

The combination of technology that promises to offer far more than messaging, an enormous number of young potential users and innovative early adopters like Wimbledon and the NBA leading the way could make chatbots irresistible to a sports organization that wants to try something new.

It's highly likely that more leagues and teams will be trying out chatbots to engage sports fans and to integrate brand sponsors into a new, dynamic conversation.