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TRAVEL INCORPORATED'S VOICE DATA SOLUTION NEARS LAUNCH AS OTHER DEVELOPERS SHOW MIXED ENTHUSIASM

By Jay Campbell • February 8, 2019

Georgia-based Travel Incorporated expects later this month to publish its voice-response assistant on Amazon's Alexa Skills store. The product remained in the design stage for nearly two years as the travel management company learned how users interacted. Some other providers that built natural language technology reported tepid interest.

It was an interactive storyboard concept that solved some of Travel Incorporated's concerns about user experience following client tests. The storyboard displays the results of voiced data queries in widgets that show chosen reports. Examples include a fever chart for online booking adoption, tables of monthly airline spending and detailed information on each car rental.

Developed on top of the TMC's proprietary Evolution data reporting solution, the Evolution Voice-response Assistant also allows client employees to ask for itinerary info and buyers to request traveler locations.

Users can have the info emailed, but Almond said it was more natural for them to view results in a browser window. The TMC provides a Google Chrome extension to enable this.

"Watching folks interact with the system, and also dealing with some of the nuances of working with travel data, we learned that the [spoken] responses sometimes were too complex and long," said Eric Almond, Travel Incorporated systems analyst and engineer. "For example, who is traveling in a certain location? If Alexa rattles off names, there's no way to remember that."

From the storyboard, users can click to drill down on data or choose a name and request a wellness check.

Travel Inc. client Flora Korman, global travel and expense manager at children's apparel company Carter's Inc., called the product a game-changer.

"Not only can you ask EVA your air, hotel and car spend data, but to our organization, the most valuable

question to ask will be the location of our travelers in case we are confronted with an emergency," according to a prepared statement attributed to Korman.

About 10 clients have been actively engaged in the testing, according to Travel Inc. SVP for business development and marketing Tracie Carillo. She said the TMC would not charge specifically for the technology.



Tracie Carillo
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EVA interprets nearly 300 voice commands. Almond said building a dictionary wasn't as challenging as accommodating variations in what people mean when they talk. For example, if it's Thursday does "last Monday" mean the Monday of this week or last week?

"So the challenge is in how you take the same questions asked eight or nine different ways and pare that down to deliver the expected response," said Almond. "There are tons of nuances and when you try to map that to your back office, that's where the testing is invaluable, [allowing you] to look at it from various customer perspectives."

Virginia-based Omega World Travel last year published skills for reporting and risk management, and now plans a skill for travelers to ask simple questions about trip plans. Nadim Hajje, Omega vice president of information technology and data analytics, also has considered the challenges with delivering details by voice. Upcoming versions of the original two skills, which already can export data to visual cards, will enable emailed results as well.

Omega charges a subscription fee for the skills, so "it's slowly gaining traction," said Hajje. He thinks adoption will grow as workers warm to technology they're accustomed to at home. Security of the data also is a concern with, say, an Echo Dot sitting on your desk. "With any new device there will be new ways of working," said Hajje. "In my office, they're normally on mute."

World Travel Inc. in Pennsylvania also is working on an Alexa skill. Reached this week, chief innovation officer Rock Blanco indicated the project had continued, with some new reporting and trip approval components added during the past few months.

World Travel has not published skills beyond the development "invite only" mode, however, as it prioritizes completion of its WorldPortal Anywhere platform, according to Blanco.

PredictX demoed a natural language product last summer; a spokesperson suggested the company was still learning about the best use cases.

"The work that we're doing on assistants is significantly deeper than just a voice or chat interface," according to a prepared statement from the official. "To make a bot genuinely useful it needs to have an idea of what it can do that is likely to be useful, and proactively look for that in the dataset. For example, a straight out-and-back response of 'What time does my flight leave?' and '5:30 p.m.' doesn't add a lot for the traveler. What is more useful is having an application that is looking for things that you might be interested in. We're currently working with a couple of early adopters on building out these use cases so that we make them genuinely useful when we conduct general release."

According to Prime Numbers Technology VP and general manager Mark Bresnahan, "We have the Alexa skill on pause in beta. While people were interested in the concept, we didn't get enough feedback that people would actually use it in the real world. If someone came to us and said, 'Hey, we really want voice capabilities,' we'd be able to launch the Alexa skill fairly quickly."

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