

# How AI Is Impacting CRM (Already)

*More customer data leads to smarter AI, and the sky's the limit*

**A**RTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is red-hot and for good reason. Coca-Cola is an example of a company that leverages AI to squeeze every drop of insight it can from the customer data it collects. Ever wonder how Cherry Sprite came about? Coca-Cola created Cherry Sprite as a new flavor after monitoring data collected from “smart” self-service soft drink fountains that allow customers to mix their own drinks. With more than 100 million Facebook fans and 35 million Twitter followers, Coca-Cola has used social media as another hugely important source for gathering customer insight.

Unilever is yet another example; its 26 data centers around the world synthesize insights from a large range of customer inputs, including social listening, CRM, and traditional market research. How did cereal-based ice creams come about under the Ben & Jerry’s brand? From Unilever using AI to find more than 50 songs that featured lyrics on “ice cream and breakfast.”

If you’re responsible for marketing to and servicing your customers, now is the time to understand how AI will impact your company’s future CRM efforts. Here are just three areas of focus:

**1. Lead scoring:** Lead scoring points sales reps toward prospects that are most likely to buy, and in the past, sales prospect algorithms classified each lead via fixed rules set by humans. With the advent of AI, lead scoring starts with these algorithms and adds to them user-defined factors.

AI self-learns by weighing each factor that makes up sales reps’ lead scores and consequently derives more attractive prospect lists than the sales prospect algorithms could on their own. Salesforce.com’s Einstein platform and Infor’s Coleman AI platform are good examples of CRM software applications that use AI for predictive lead scoring.

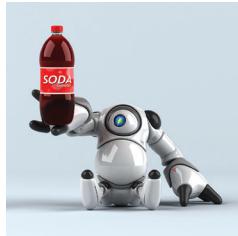
**2. Chatbots:** Chatbots, robots that simulate human conversations, are increasingly used by CRM applications to assist customers in finding answers to queries and ensure that they’re guided to a suitable channel (e.g., self-service or a company employee). While chatbots are currently focused on enhancing customer service platforms, they can potentially be applied to a variety of customer interactions. Oracle predicts that 80 percent of major brands will be using chatbots by 2020, and the Gartner Group predicts that 85 percent of customer interactions will be automated by 2020.

**3. Sales forecasting:** Applying AI to sales forecasting is the top growth area for sales teams. While historical sales data can be used to predict future sales, changing circumstances inevitably lead to inaccurate sales forecasts. AI offers a comprehensive understanding of each customer’s needs and past behaviors, thereby reducing recurrent blind spots in sales and account scoring. AI also allows marketing and sales to assess customer experience and customer journeys and to gain real-time insight into customer pain points, preferences, sentiments, and other buying triggers, all of which help to create more accurate sales forecasts. Gartner predicts within five years more than 50 percent of the Fortune 500 will be using a combination of neural sales data and sales AI to optimize sales.

When AI is applied to CRM, the possibilities seem endless. AI-powered virtual assistants will automate sales and service tasks. Chatbots will help customers complete simple tasks. AI-powered content-generation tools will create one-to-one personalized marketing materials. AI will make data entry and data cleansing easier. AI-powered internal and customer training will become the norm. The list goes on.

While AI may have a checkered past in delivering meaningful ROI, two drivers will continue to propel the application of AI to CRM: (1) the continued explosion of customer and market data, which has created the need to better process and analyze this data; and (2) the acceptance of the cloud, which enables CRM systems to integrate with data from different digital sources (social media communities, websites, third-party data, etc.).

To be successful in our digital world, great companies make tremendous efforts to better understand their customers’ behavior, create unique products and services to address their customers’ needs, and communicate with their customers in a more targeted manner. AI provides powerful tools to accomplish these objectives. Perhaps this explains why Coca-Cola and Unilever continue to lead the pack in their respective industries. 



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