Comisiynydd y
Gymraeg
Welsh Language
Commissioner

Introducing a bilingual web chat platform supported by a 'chatbot'.

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Background

Before the pandemic, the Wales Millennium Centre received around 300 phone calls every day to book, exchange and return tickets along with other customer service enquiries. A bank of occasional and permanent Customer Relations Assistants was employed to deal with these calls, including Welsh language enquiries. The answer rate for all calls (English and Welsh) was around 62%, so they were unable to deal with around 38% of customer calls.

What needed to change?

During the lockdown period of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Centre saw an 85% reduction in income, putting significant financial pressure on the organisation. As a result, significant cuts had to be made to the staff of the Customer Relations team.

So that the Centre could continue to offer customer service, a decision was made to increase the digital provision for customers, which would offer an on-line self-service tool on the Centre's website. In doing this, however, it was necessary to ensure that they continued to offer a high-quality service that also complied with the requirements of the Welsh language standards. In addition, the centre was committed to offering a Welsh language service proactively to its customers.

How were the changes implemented?

In order to implement the service, the Centre had to invest time and resources to upgrade the website so that it was possible to deal with enquiries that would have previously reached them via telephone.

A new bilingual web-chat software was procured. Consideration was given to the Welsh language from the start of the tender process emphasising the need for fully bilingual services in the specification.

Once the software was acquired, training was given to Customer Relations Assistants on the new system so that they were confident in using it to provide customer service to Welsh speakers.

How does the service work?

When visiting the website the reader will see a colourful button *'Can we help*?' in the corner of each page. Users fill in an initial chat form where they are asked to enter their name, email address and the nature of their enquiry. They will then be greeted by a bot, in the same language as the initial form, which advises them that it can answer basic questions, or transfer them to an adviser (during staff hours).

Whilst some users wish to be transferred to a member of staff immediately, the majority will ask their question to the bot first. The bot (IBM Watson Assistant) uses natural language processing to recognise the query based on example words or phrases that are fed into it during its development. This resource is continuously developing and learning. Once the nature of the query has been established, it responds using one of 30 stock responses, providing general useful information about policies, products and links to relevant parts of the website.
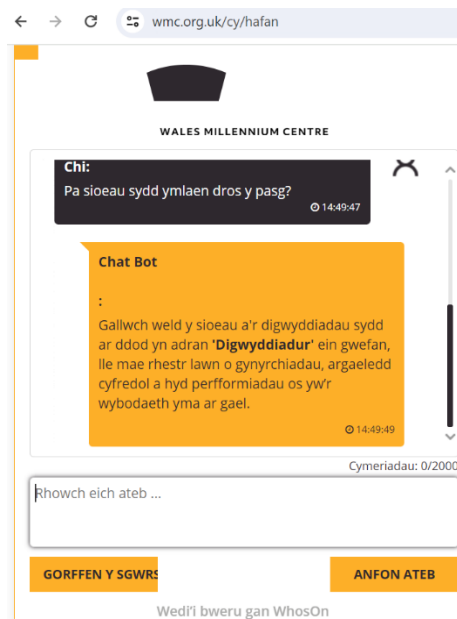
The Customer Relations Assistants on shift monitor the platform that integrates with the bot. They can see all the conversations on the website and monitor live customer conversations with the bot where possible. From there, they can either take over or wait for a request for the enquiry to be transferred. Where there is a request to transfer the enquiry to a member of staff, they will receive a notification and the conversation will open for them automatically. The system will ensure that any conversations in Welsh are transferred to a member of the team who can speak Welsh.

What are the advantages of this services?

Data for 2022-2023 has shown that the number of average daily calls to the Centre has fallen from 300 to 92 calls a day. As a result, the Centre's ability to deal with the telephone enquiries received has vastly improved.

Compared to the previous arrangements, more enquiries are being dealt with and are resolved quicker too. Customers using the webchat either manage to get a resolution through the bot (and without the intervention of a member of staff) or manage to get a resolution through a member of staff following being transferred through this channel. Where there is a need to transfer the enquiry to a member of staff (during staffed hours), the handling rate (in either language) for the current financial year to date was

88%, compared to 68% over the phone. So, the service has helped the Centre to significantly improve its performance in dealing with customer enquiries.

During 2022-23 the 24/7 bot-supported web chat platform has handled more than double the number of enquiries than staffed phone lines have and at a fraction of the cost.

Were there any challenges?

Due to the generally limited capacity of the bots, customer feedback regarding the bot in Welsh and English is mixed. This is partly because customers expect the service to deal with more complex enquiries and expect overly specific answers. The Millennium Centre tries to make it clear to customers that the bot can only provide generic information in response to basic enquiries, and this is true for English and Welsh enquiries.

For many questions with a simple answer (e.g. 'what is the running time of tonight's show?', 'at what age am I entitled to a higher concession?''), the bot is effective in recognising the question and providing information or provide relevant links to information. In these cases, the feedback about the service in both languages is good.

A significant proportion of users either ask the bot to perform tasks for them (e.g. 'book me tickets to Les Mis', 'resend my order') or to provide dynamic responses rather than stock responses (e.g. 'what's on in the stalls on Saturday 18th February?', 'can you tell me what the upcoming shows are?'). In these cases, wherever possible, the bot provides simple instructions on how users can find this information on the website. This does not always meet the needs of the enquirer which can lead to negative feedback at times.

Ensuring language accuracy in the Welsh language service has been a challenge at times. There are mutations, dialects, and the wider variety of ways to present sentences in Welsh, which means that the Welsh bot requires a relatively higher volume of sample text fed to it in order for the natural language processing to operate effectively.

However, the service has improved over time as transcripts are reviewed, checked for errors and example sentences where there have been misinterpretations in the past are fed back into the bot.

The main advantage of the software is the fact that it's settings and the interface are very simple to use.

What advice would Wales Millenium Centre offer to an organisation who wants to provide a similar service to their users?

For a bilingual organisation that deals with a high number of enquiries that can largely be answered by stock responses, investing in a web chat service can lead to savings in terms of staffing costs, while maintaining a fully bilingual service.

Finding a suitable supplier is very important to ensure that they understand from the earliest stage of the procurement process, the importance of being able to offer a fully bilingual service to the customer.

Time needs to be invested in setting up the service and maintaining it continuously, not only in operation, but in retraining the bot based on transcripts. However, the investment is worthwhile.

Contact details

Organisation: Wales Millennium Centre

E-mail: angharadc.lewis@wmc.org.uk>

Contact officer: Angharad Lewis – Senior Bilingual Copywriter

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Welsh Language Commissioner's comments

As organisations and individuals, we are increasingly dependent on information technology, websites, and software in our lives. Over the past few years there has been a clear trend in how organisations and service users are increasingly turning to technology to offer instant and accessible customer service to their service users. This is certainly true following the period of the pandemic when organisations had to adapt and find alternative methods to offer services to the public.

In order to offer a contemporary service that is accessible and of a high standard to the public in Wales in their chosen language (and in order to treat Welsh and English information equally) organisations must ensure that they have the infrastructure and technology that enables them to provide digital and online services in Welsh.

The technology is constantly changing and evolving. In the past, technology, and the ability to offer digital services in Welsh has been a challenge for organisations, but great strides have been made in the field of Welsh language technology over the past few years.

It is encouraging to see organisations like the Wales Millennium Centre making the Welsh language a key factor when developing new digital services. This case shows that providing bilingual digital services should not be more of a difficulty nor different from several other requirements that need to be considered when developing new software - such as accessibility, security, and legislation.

More and more organisations these days offer an online chat service through "chatbot" software, and it is good to see an example where an equal Welsh and English service is easily offered to the public in Wales. I look forward to seeing the Centre's work develop further in this area. I trust that other organisations, upon learning about this practice, will set out to find similar methods to offer their digital services in Welsh in the future.