

BRINGING AI TO LIFE

COMMUNICATIONS IN A CROWDED MARKET

A report by Brands2Life exploring the challenges of telling your AI story

THE CHALLENGES OF AI COMMS

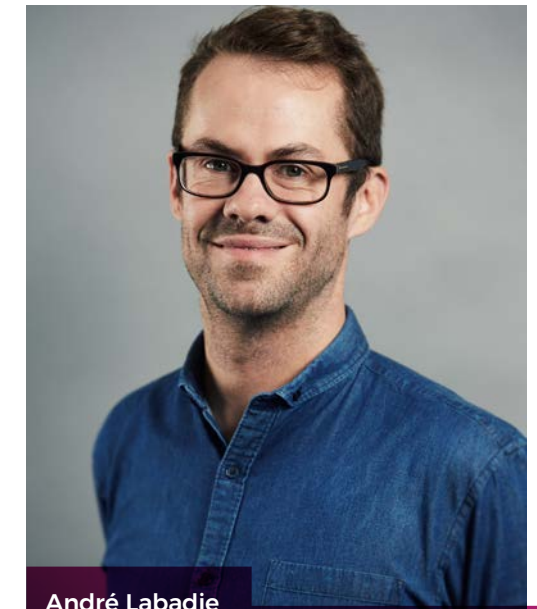
AI companies must navigate complex and turbulent pre-conceived notions of what the technology will do in order to communicate its benefits to a diverse mix of stakeholders.

Developing and deploying Artificial Intelligence (AI) is incredibly tough. Imbuing computers with the power to perform supremely complex tasks, or even to think and behave like – and more effectively than – humans is, for many of us, mind-blowingly difficult. It's also coming to prominence at a time when there is ever-growing interest and debate about the power of technology and its impact on society.

AI is evolving fast and investment is growing rapidly: venture capital funding of AI companies soared 72 percent last year, hitting a record \$9.3 billion globally.¹ And in sectors as varied as fashion, healthcare, law and finance, covering everything from cyber security through to connected home devices such as Alexa to drug development, AI is beginning to revolutionise how organisations operate and serve their customers.

Yet, while there's huge interest and excitement in AI's ability to improve customer services or consumer technology, many remain fearful of its impact. Fears range from job displacement to the impact of biased data in intelligent algorithms. From the risk of driverless cars joining our roads, to the challenges of customers having the skills, knowledge and infrastructure to implement it effectively.

Everyone is trying to cut through the noise of AI, both within the media as well as internal and investor communications and beyond. Vendors are championing their latest products; organisations are explaining to their employees how their roles may change, and different groups are voicing concerns with AI's application.



André Labadie
Managing Director, Business & Technology
Brands2Life

It's certainly something that many of our clients are asking us to help with.

So, we wanted to explore some of the challenges AI firms are facing to get their story told. We spoke to in-house marketing and comms leaders, some of the UK's most knowledgeable technology journalists, and one of the country's leading political thinkers on the topic, Lord Clement-Jones, Chair of the Lords AI Committee. The result is revealing insight into the communications challenges the industry faces, from AI washing to ethics, the appetite for AI stories in the media, and the approaches businesses are using to stand out from the crowd.

As Lord Clement-Jones puts it, "the narrative around the technology is so important". Read on to see how the industry is addressing it.

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-08/vcs-plowed-a-record-9-3-billion-into-ai-startups-last-year>

TOO MUCH NOISE

When so many organisations are clamouring for a voice on AI, there's an inevitable fight to be heard. Vendors must work hard to create a differentiated narrative and journalists are being bombarded by AI stories from all quarters.

It hasn't always been like that. Emily Orton is Chief Marketing Officer at Darktrace, the cyber AI business founded by mathematicians from the University of Cambridge and government cyber intelligence experts in the US and the UK. She sums up the journey AI has been on: "When we went to market in 2013, not many people were talking about machine learning or AI. What's happened in the last two years is that the terms are being more widely used and there is some amount of confusion over what is automation and what is genuine AI."

According to Cherry Gray, Senior Communications Manager for EMEA at software giant, VMware: "AI in the media is a really crowded space. Everyone wants to have an opinion, whether they are a natural fit or not."

That means, according to Raj Balasundaram, Senior Vice President for Artificial Intelligence at marketing automation leader, Emarsys, that "now that everybody talks about AI, half of that information is not true, given by people who call themselves experts but have no knowledge or hands-on experience about how it works."

The overall result is a dilution of the message, and an increase in the confusion of what AI actually is. This in turn makes it harder to develop a clear position.

To cut through this, Lord Clement-Jones believes businesses need to have people "with the scientific knowledge who can explain the algorithms. And a team of communications professionals who can translate this deeply technical content into something which is digestible across all audiences. You need it to be transparent, so that people can see what's gone into the algorithm, why it is making those decisions, but explain this in an accessible way."

Digital Catapult, the UK's leading agency for the early adoption of advanced digital technologies, is fortunate enough to have this kind of expertise. As Amanda Kamin, Director of Marketing,

Communications and Events explains: "We're lucky to have world-leading experts and a high number of PhDs working alongside us, and they are fully accessible to our communications team. Our research pipeline is always growing, and this provides plenty of content that we find positions us as innovation leaders and drives engagement with our key audiences."

Nick Panayi, Chief Marketing Officer at IPsoft, the world's largest privately-owned AI company and creator of the most human-like digital colleague, Amelia, sees a need to "crystallise a new space in the market. AI is very broad, so you need to be able to identify where you can carve out space. For us, it's been being able to bridge the human to machine divide."

However, this work is often overlooked in the rush to capitalise on the hype around new technology. As this initial excitement dies down, there can often be a degree of scepticism and hype fatigue. As Vanessa Colomar, Partner and Head of Communications and Investor Relations at Invoke Capital, backer of four AI businesses, says: "People roll their eyes at AI because it's seen as so ubiquitous."



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Raj Balasundaram, Emarsys

AI WASHING

Some vendors are undoubtedly guilty of 'AI-washing', badging their latest offering as some form of AI, when the claim is tenuous at best. One study found that two-fifths of Europe's artificial intelligence start-ups do not use any AI programmes in their products.²

This makes it harder for external parties, whether potential customers, influencers or journalists, to identify the truly innovative propositions from the bandwagon jumpers. There's also the challenge of a perceived lack of evidence due to the early-stage and often confidential nature of many AI projects.

To an extent, this is not new – every technology trend has seen products with limited relevance suddenly rebranded to fit in with what is perceived to be new. It doesn't seem too long ago since 'cloud-washing' accusations abounded. It's something that Sooraj Shah, leading tech journalist and contributor to the New Statesman and Forbes agrees with. "While AI and machine learning started out as exciting technologies with a number of interesting stories, many of the industry's vendors have started using the terms excessively, and often for products that really shouldn't be considered AI." One of Shah's biggest complaints when being pitched by AI firms is product news where AI seems like an add on to an existing solution.

Darktrace's Orton suggests that some brands need to be more accurate with the labels they apply to themselves. "There's a lot of hugely positive, incremental progress being made on streamlining existing processes within legacy technology. However, that's not necessarily AI – it's often automation."

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In many ways it is understandable – jumping on the back of a trend is one way to improve the chances of being discovered, whether it's something as tactical as SEO keywords or as a broader way to reach more prospects.

Yet as we're increasingly seeing, aligning to subject matter that's not a natural fit can leave brands exposed when stakeholders probe further, whether that's a journalist like Shah considering inclusion in a feature, or a potential investor in a funding round.

This accuracy is vital for Invoke's Colomar. "You become a credible AI company when you have credible AI people running it." At Invoke, which has invested in Luminance, an award-winning machine learning platform for the legal industry, and Darktrace, those academic credentials can be hugely important when considering investment. "With an investor hat, we look at where people have gone to university, what is their AI experience and knowledge. Luminance and Darktrace do have that Cambridge maths background and can tell a scientific story."

² <https://www.ft.com/content/21b19010-3e9f-11e9-b896-fe36ec32aece>

A NEED FOR EDUCATION

Yet there is a sense that simply having a legitimate voice is not enough sometimes – to a degree, the industry needs to evolve. Balasundaram says: "We need AI to reach maturity in order to comprehend the implications better, if not the algorithms. This is being talked about as the next industrial revolution, but like all good technologies, there's always an education period."

That education piece is an important part for Gray. "Currently when you talk about AI, people think about robots or terminators. That's because we're still in the unknown, and while we as a vendor might talk about the technical details, what ends up in front of the average person on the street needs to be tangible. Rightly or wrongly, AI taking jobs is a concept people can understand and apply to their lives. That's why we need to educate, to talk about the benefits it can have in a sector like healthcare, which is continually advancing naturally, even if people don't realise it."

As Digital Catapult's Kamin explains: "We prefer a technology optimistic approach. There is always change from technology adoption, and impacts need consideration, but it also opens many opportunities and this aspect is often minimised. Reporting can tend to lean towards sensationalism at times and it may be more realistic for alternative perspectives to be shared more often."

Orton sees a key issue as distinguishing between general and narrow AI. "There's almost two conversations going on at the same time. There's the idea of a general intelligence, where machines become almost sentient, understanding everything. There's a lot of fear about that."

"But where the real advances are happening, the true innovation, is the narrow, specific applications of AI where it is dealing with a particular problem. Where it is becoming very good at making decisions and helping humans to solve those problems to a higher degree of accuracy and much faster."

Indeed, it is these focused solutions where AI is having an impact today. Whether controlling cognitive assistants in customer service, reducing R&D costs and improving efficiency in drug development, or making scarce healthcare resources go further, the use of AI is helping a variety of organisations be more successful.

It's this positive message that needs to be promoted in order to combat the confusion around what AI actually is and the more negative – and unrealistic – 'terminator scenario' noise of robots and job losses. By focusing on these examples, not only do brands have the opportunity to present the benefits, but they will be able to do so in a way that is realistic and does not fall into the trap of overhyping.

This is particularly important for a sector such as healthcare, where it's critical to show, rather than tell, how technologies such as AI can deliver benefits directly to patients themselves. That might be a pharma organisation being able to develop a drug more quickly and efficiently, or a patient who has experienced the benefit of a virtual trial or personalised medicine; whatever it is, having that real-life example is key to compelling, credible storytelling.

This means that the primary focus for the communications function needs to be on the human impact, starting with the positive angle, with the technology being brought in to demonstrate credibility. Or, in the words of Natalie Homer, Global Head of PR and Communications at Emarsys, "taking the tech out of technology". For example, in a discussion about AI and jobs, the message should be about how work will be improved for employees, whether that's through more meaningful work and less repetitive admin leading to a better work-life balance, or new opportunities that didn't exist before the advent of AI. At the same time, there needs to be transparency in the conversation on how it will affect people on the street.

Beth Wood, Communications and PR at the Alan Turing Institute, provides an excellent example to this point. "Our AI stories focus on people and the real world problems we tackle with cutting edge science and technology. Communicating in partnership with the organisations we work with is key for us. Particularly in a crowded market where media are receiving hundreds of AI stories a day. For example, we communicated about our work with the Cystic Fibrosis Trust (CFT) to explain how machine learning can predict, with 35% improvement in accuracy, whether a cystic fibrosis patient should be referred for lung transplant (compared to existing statistical methods).

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A QUESTION OF ETHICS

We collaborated with a clinician as well as a person living with cystic fibrosis who could talk about the impact of this technology on his life. It's these kinds of stories which interest The Economist, not necessarily the algorithms behind them."

Any discussion that looks at the impact of AI on people will ultimately need to consider ethics. It's a subject that the industry has wrestled with for some time - and not always successfully. In fact, at the last count, there were more than 80 frameworks for ethics in AI. How do you choose which one to follow and which one to practice?

Whether it's the potential consequences of increased efficiency (such as job losses and where the responsibility lies in mitigating that) or the threat of unchecked programmes discriminating against certain groups, any brand operating in AI has to have at least considered its ethics position. Even vendors that feel certain their AI could never be deployed in an unethical situation need to bear in mind the perception of AI - headlines touching on AI or technology ethics can strike a chord with consumers, which can in turn influence their view of AI as a whole.

"The AI ethics conversation has progressed this year and become mainstream" said Kamin.

"There is a real need now to differentiate views in the current discussion and move the debate further towards actual change-making. It will be fascinating to see industry, government and start-ups adapt to ethics considerations alongside market needs. I don't see appetite dimming anytime soon."

Lord Clement-Jones says: "If you are a technologist nowadays, you have to understand that you are holding your clients' hand, not just from a technology point of view, but from the culture of their organisation." In his opinion, you don't just develop or apply AI; you potentially have to be a consultant across the board on AI in all sorts of different ways, including ethics. "They need you to tell them how they ethically screen, how they implement an AI code of ethics, whether they need to be able to audit their systems. There are immense implications for society, and technology vendors need to understand that people do not know what the consequences will be, so they should not wait to be asked."

A counter argument to this point would be that many of the dilemmas presented by AI are not covered by existing legislation. In a commercial situation, brands are faced with the choice of attempting to align to the shifting moral parameters of society as a whole without legislative protection, which could see them become disadvantaged in the market, or be exposed when the law catches up.

It's a tricky balance. From a communications perspective, it ultimately comes down to a need for transparency, as highlighted before. For any organisation whose AI impacts people - i.e. almost all of them - a position on ethics is increasingly non-negotiable. As well as considering the effect on people, such a position also needs to include a robust plan for if the technology were to be hijacked or used unethically by third parties.

That is not to say that it is a conversation, however, to be endured or dealt with quickly in order to push your solution. "You can't avoid the bigger topics," says Panayi. "But it can be an opportunity to stand out. If done well, there's a positive side to the story that you can own."

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A consensus, or partnering with or contributing to like-minded organisations and industry associations, can help when it comes to trying to educate external stakeholders, whether customers, the media or the general public. Consolidating more of the noise into a collective voice, makes it easier to hear what's being said. Communicating similar themes, particularly when it comes to as contentious a subject as AI ethics, also adds additional substance to the overall message and reduces risk.

Having a strong point of view can, however, be instrumental in changing your perception from vendor to expert. But that doesn't mean you have to have all the answers.

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Nick Panayi, IPsoft

THE CONTENT YOU NEED TO SECURE THE CUT-THROUGH YOU WANT

With so many varied challenges, having the right tools to get that cut through is vital. While modern communications is so much more than media relations, the insights from the journalists canvassed for this report provide useful guidance on the type of stories and content brands should be considering.

Mirroring what our communicators said about making the AI story tangible to the average person, Shah comments that while the publications he writes for, including Forbes and the New Statesman, are interested in AI stories, they need to relate to the wider issues that interest his audience.

For Charlotte Jee, reporter at MIT Technology Review, there is great demand for AI stories. However, that doesn't mean product pitches – she wants stories and case studies on the implementations of AI technologies, plus new research studies. With the latter, she is looking for an explanation of what the research is, but more importantly “how it applies to the real world and its implications”.

When it came to content, both Colomar and Panayi championed video. For the former, broadcast in particular “is still the single best way to get your message out there.”

Panayi sees owned video as powerful. “Market demonstration videos, clear, one-minute films, are a good way to show new use cases. Prospective customers can see themselves when it relates to their sectors.” IPsoft films the panels and fireside chats that take place at its annual Digital Workforce Summit, which involve customers talking about tangible results in a “relaxed and honest way,” Panayi says.

He also values analyst reports, “especially in new markets where people seek that third-party validation.” In a similar way, data-based research can have a significant impact if it is used in a way to explain a variety of perspectives, concerns and needs.

This in turn can be used to demonstrate the requirement for the brand's solution through a compelling narrative. That doesn't simply mean the classic research press release tactic – adding additional analysis and graphics can be used to turn data into reports, while packaging up the results for multiple sectors and audiences can be used to generate social media content, direct marketing material and sales collateral.

External parties have also proven useful for Emarsys too. Homer sees them as a good way to help create a high-level thought leadership piece which, “with the help of experts, we can then put the consumer angle on it for broader appeal.” However, this needs to be linked with customer advocacy in order to make that shift from theory to reality.

This means that sometimes methods which might be considered more traditional can deliver significant impact, particularly when working across multiple markets. VMware's Gray sees opinion pieces in the most influential titles, “which give us a lot more spread, a lot of messaging opportunities”, as working well across both the UK and the wider EMEA region and can work better at explaining some of the issues than content like infographics.

Having the right spokespeople and the medium in which to explore the complexity of issues is vital. Whatever the channel, there needs to be scope to discuss the ideas, while having the credentials to articulate them.

FIVE TAKEAWAYS

In summary, here are our five key takeaways to help you communicate your AI proposition more effectively.

BE CLEAR ON WHAT YOU ARE OFFERING

With so much noise, it's important, in the words of IPsoft's Panayi, to "find and own a new space in the market. AI is a very broad tool, so you need to be clear on where you fit and what you offer, and how that links to AI."

FOCUS ON THE IMPACT, NOT THE TECH

From Panayi's "start with the positive angle" to Homer's "take the tech out of technology", our respondents were all clear that in order to get cut through, AI brands need to talk about how things are going to change, not how AI is important. You're not selling an algorithm, you're selling how it can change the lives of people.

BE CREDIBLE

With so much 'AI washing', it's important that your products and solutions truly are what you say they are. Not every vendor can claim to have truly game-changing AI developed by large teams of experts, and that's fine. But everyone who wants their voice to be heard should be able to draw upon real experts with credible viewpoints and interesting, forward-thinking views.

STORIES, NOT PRODUCTS

Real world examples are vital where they exist and where customers are willing to speak. If they're not, then using data to support your points can be immensely powerful, as well as allowing you to talk about wider trends within your sector. Wood from the Alan Turing Institute also summed this up well: "A lot of what sits behind AI is often complex mathematical equations and algorithms, which do not make for a compelling comms story on their own. You have to know which ones to pick up and which ones to let go. And when is a good time to tell that story."

BE BOLD

AI is seen by many as being futuristic and visionary, so harness that where appropriate. And don't avoid the bigger topics if you have something to say that's compelling and can withstand robust scrutiny. This last point is vital to manage the threat of having your message hijacked. "There are some negatives to what we're talking about, but we have to face those in order to be able to demonstrate the positives of what we're doing," explains Panayi.

HELPING COMMUNICATE YOUR AI STORY

It's abundantly clear that there exists immense opportunity in the AI space, if the challenges of cutting through the noise, demonstrating credibility, education and answering the ethics question can be managed appropriately. The experts canvassed for this report are all operating at the highest levels, which demonstrates the sort of talent working in AI today.

The likes of Darktrace, Emarsys, IPsoft, Luminance, VMware and others all work with Brands2Life to consistently communicate their message and perspective on the hottest and most influential technology of the decade. From building Darktrace into the unrivalled voice on AI security through blanket top tier coverage, to creating thought leadership platforms for VMware and Emarsys; from showing how IPsoft's digital colleague is transforming the workplace, to championing Luminance's disruption of the legal sector, we know what it takes to get your voice heard.

To find out how we might be able to help communicate your AI story, get in touch:

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