

CONVONET: USING AMAZON ALEXA FOR ONLINE SHOPPING

Globally, there are 285 million people with vision impairments. 30 million of those people are blind. In Australia alone, there are 357 000 people with vision impairments, and this number is expected to grow to 564 000 by 2030. For these people, online shopping can be incredibly challenging. Screen readers can be difficult to use, sometimes taking several minutes to describe a single page.

Accessibility presents both an opportunity and a challenge for businesses with digital products. By exploring new ways for users to experience and interact with digital products, businesses are able to open up their services to new markets, increase user penetration, and improve the ability of people with physical limitations to access their services.

THE SOLUTION

As part of our 2016 Beyond Smartphone Hackathon, the Outware Mobile Practice from Melbourne IT developed an Amazon Alexa experience that allows users to add products to online shopping carts using voice commands. To make this experience possible, Outware built an Amazon Alexa skill that links to the Coles shopping API. The project, dubbed 'ConvoNet', allows users to use an Amazon Echo device to nominate items in the Coles online catalogue, and have those items display in the shopping cart of a purpose-built iOS application. From here, users can ask the Echo to read the contents of the shopping cart back to them before placing their final order.

ConvoNet uses AWS Lambda as a serverless strategy, and has been built using NodeJS, Swift, and Python.

In order for ConvoNet to be marketable to a broader audience, it must support multiple devices. Outware is currently consolidating the project into a single codebase that will support various voice-activated speakers, including Google Home, and is also working on integrating this service into a native mobile application that can be used independently of these specific devices.

THE OUTCOME

While this project was developed with specific focus on meeting the needs of blind or visually impaired users, the end result is a product with mass market potential. Integrated devices and digital experiences are the next horizon for businesses with digital products, with new technologies such as smart watches, cars, and televisions presenting new opportunity areas. Integrating ConvoNet's voice ordering service with a smartphone application makes it a valuable tool for users of varying levels of ability. By creating a seamless, integrated experience between the Amazon Echo and the user's smartphone, ConvoNet provides users with the option of engaging with the ordering service in whatever way suits them at a given point in time. Whether users are at home, speaking to their Amazon Echo, or on-the-go using their mobile device, ConvoNet provides multiple entry points to the online ordering experience.

The Outware Mobile Practice from Melbourne IT has presented ConvoNet to a number of leading Australian businesses, and is continuing to develop the product roadmap and future state vision.

Contact us today to learn more about our Innovation Program and discuss how a Voice Services project could help your business.



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