

## AI Assistants - The New Gatekeepers in the Consumer Decision-Making Process



Jones Mathew, Professor - Marketing, Great Lakes Institute of Management, Gurgaon

---

Juhi now depends on her AI Assistant to do a lot of her things before she even consciously thinks of doing them. Initially, it was disconcerting. Now she does not understand how she ever managed without one. Is it time for marketers to re-consider their direct relationship-building activities and strategies with consumers? Should there be a rethink on how brands will be built-in the new era of AIMLA – Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning and Analytics?

The traditional way of convincing a customer of a brand's relevance will definitely not work anymore as increasingly, consumer decisions will not be made entirely by the individual human consumer. The five broad steps in the traditional consumer decision making process is the – need recognition, information search, alternatives evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior – need to be re-assessed. Imagine a situation, where AI Assistants will sense or evaluate your need before you consciously articulate it. For instance, your groceries are running low. Based on previous consumption patterns, the AI Assistant would 'know' exactly when you need to do a refill and orders supplies accordingly on Grofers or Big Basket. Knowing that you don't get home before 8 PM, it sets the time of delivery of the shopped items to 8:30 PM, giving you 30 minutes to get fresh and relax with your favourite drink. The energy level in your 'helloes' to your Assistant or your dog would help the Assistant sense your level of tiredness and possibly inform the delivery router to delay the delivery by 30 minutes. It also knows the capacity of your refrigerator's different sections and orders sku sizes accordingly so that there is no stuffing that needs to be done. Everything fits in smoothly.

Information search and evaluation of alternatives are something you couldn't be bothered with anymore as the Assistant searches price comparison sites and checks for current deals, checks with your credit limit, examines which grocery chain's loyalty program has been treating you the best and orders the best 'deal' seamlessly, instantaneously. All this happens, while you relax in your bathtub

sipping your drink. By the way, the Assistant has already calculated that at this rate of guzzling, your wine stock needs replenishment two days earlier than usual. Time to reorder: Thursday.

Easy availability of modern day AI-based Man Fridays beg the following question: Should marketers be making themselves relevant to the Assistant rather than to the consumer? Is it time for brands to bark-up the 'right' tree? The purist would still cling to the traditional view that it is the consumer who will ultimately decide on the brand. Perish the thought. The consumer just abdicated his right to do that as the Assistant is far superior in all areas of consumer decision making. Besides, it frees the customer to watch the latest episode of Black Mirror. Would the customer give-up hedonistic pleasure for utilitarian calculations? Highly doubtful. Hence, marketers need to reorient their game as far as the information search step goes too. 'Universal set,' 'Consideration set,' and 'Decision set' are not a group of brands that the consumer evaluates anymore. Her Assistant does, though. The Assistant is INCHARGE. What sort of creative messaging would need to be done to entice a string of algorithms to pick your brand? Will emotions take a back seat? Will creativity in advertisements disappear over the next decade? Or will emotions come back into fashion as AI Assistants use machine learning and deep learning to mimic human emotions so accurately that it would be difficult to tell the difference between a bot and a human? How should marketers talk to such emotion-rich, intelligent AI Assistants? What about the ubiquitous AIDA – Attention-Interest-Desire-Action – model? AIDA for who? What is the role of the human consumer now? Will she be merely a user, a 'consumer'? Meanwhile, will the AI Assistant become the gatekeeper and buyer, the influencer and decision-maker?

The purchase decision may at first appear to be in the hands of the ultimate consumer - you. The AI Assistant, like a trusted servant, would offer a dashboard with all the shortlisted brands and a pro-and-cons table against each probably. With its far superior capacity & capability to search and evaluate a larger, (much larger) number of options than you could possibly ever do, the p-and-c tables could be vast. Would you really want to waste your time evaluating the options? Of course not. Besides, the Assistant is emotionally neutral therefore no 'bad calls' on brands are expected, nor are impulsive purchases when your credit card limit is flashing red. The Assistant is so much more trustworthy because it is not human. Foist the decision making role on it. Focus on the bigger things in life. How should marketers talk to AI that doesn't care if 'daag achche hain'? Should marketing communication themes change? Will the AI Assistant help make humans the 'truly rational being' we always aspired to be, but were never programmed to be because of our humanness? How should marketers communicate with a human whose emotional quotient will be overwhelmed by AI assisted rationality? What will the new rules of branding be? Will marketers move away from cultivating 'brand love' & 'brand heart' to 'brand brain' & 'brand logic'? Marketing and advertising are likely to become so boring without hyperbole and extravagance! What about the post-purchase behavior stage? How do companies address this as of now? Service reminder messages and calls, invitations to special events, customer relationship management tools, engagement algorithms – the works. How will this change? Marketing will have granular behavioural & psychosocial data on consumers. If your AI gatekeeper is convinced about a brand, it will allow access by a brand. If not, well, the marketer will have to try somebody else who hasn't got an AI Assistant yet! With AI Assistants of all kinds sold already, old-fashioned marketers will need luck finding someone who doesn't already have one. Marketers have to take the new intermediary seriously.

The article can be read online, [here](#).