Virtual Agent Voice & Tone

Research Readout

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Goals

This study would help us determine Veteran expectations for a chatbot personality, tone, and voice––and to explore their preferences and opinions about the value a chatbot could provide for their experience on VA.gov.

USDS objectives

1. Transform critical, public-facing services
2. Expand the use of common platforms, services, and tools
3. Rethink how the Government buys digital services
4. Bring top technical talent into civic service

Method and participants

Moderated interviews were conducted via Zoom from April 26-30.

Participants included:

- 10 Veterans
- 7 Veteran family or caregivers
- 9 women, 7 men
- Ages 25-65+
- Locations: AK, CA, FL, GA, MD, NC, PA, TN, TX, VA, WA

Key insights and opportunities

Vets, caretakers and family members want communication with the VA to be **personable, curious** and **empathetic**.

" *[When] in person, they can see I'm a female, generally get a more soft response. It's not always what I want--sometimes soothing, sometimes demeaning. In emails it doesn't really matter, but I want to be addressed right. Automatically makes me angry they couldn't take the 3 seconds [to see I'm a woman]. They're obviously not looking at the rest of my chart.*

Vets share a lot of personal info with VA, so they don't want to **retell their story** everytime they interact with it.

" *If I'm speaking about my care, i want them to have access to my records, I'm just spinning a wheel when talking to someone. I'm service connected, rated on x y z and trying to get a prescription, but we need to start tests etc. - why can't you look at my history and see it's there and start from there rather than reinventing the wheel every single time I talk to the VA.*

If Vets already have an account, they generally sign in to have a more **personable and tailored experience**.

"

Yes - always [sign in]. To me it means I'm looking at things specifically geared to me. Going to va.gov is like a 1-800 number, if you don't have a purpose you're going to be lost.
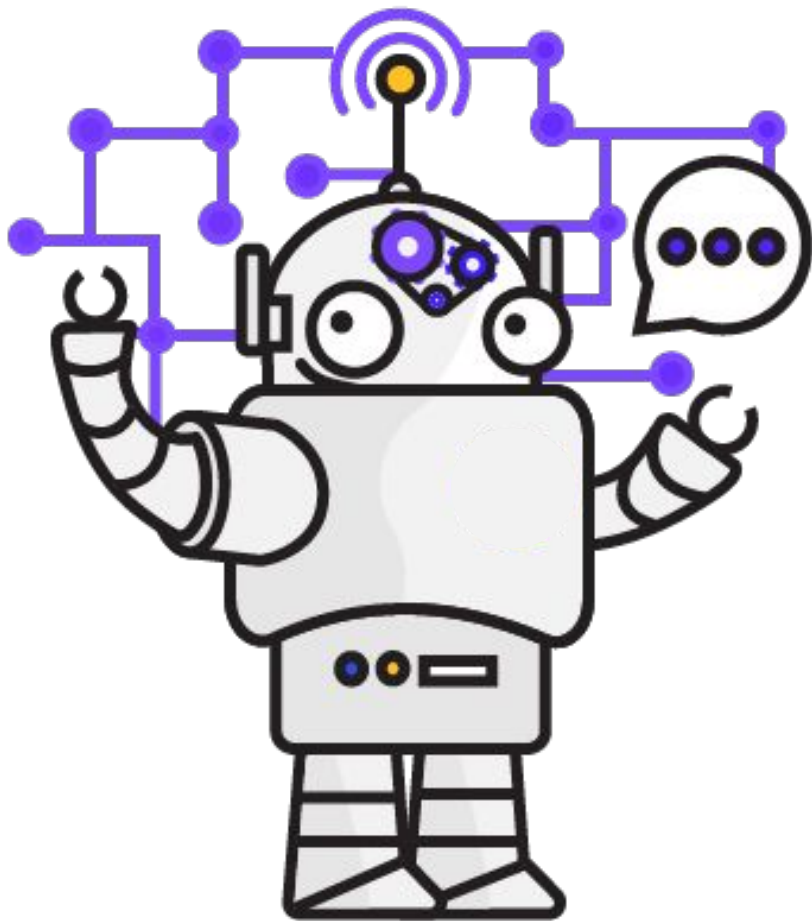
Vet expectations for chatbots is generally low to provide **nuanced, accurate responses**.

This creates an opportunity to exceed expectations for the VA chatbot.

"

In the end I'm typically able to resolve the problem, but not always via chatbot. [It] acts as an intermediary before talking to a person.

Most Vets want a professional, yet friendly tone that projects confidence but can also **display humility when it is wrong or inaccurate**.

> " *[Tone should be] helpful, like an usher or concierge. Something that's able to ask questions of a veteran that's not computer literate. People like my father want someone to talk to him. Chatbot [should] break down what's being input, then prompt and ask questions from there, like a child.*
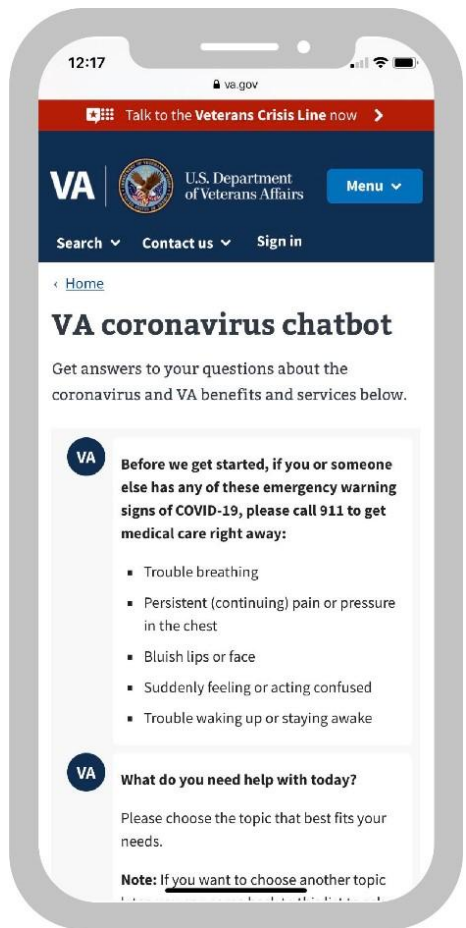
Naming the chatbot may require a compromise. The VA can provide a name for context, like VA coronavirus chatbot, so it is clear Vets are not speaking with an actual person, but still be able to use a conversational tone that is not dry or bureaucratic.

"

I never thought about it, but more like a human-like name, so it will make me feel like I'm talking to a human. A name I recognize will make me feel more comfortable to use it.

"

I don't think it's necessary. I think the expectation of chat is that a bot is going to be the first part of it and if they can't answer it they go to a live person - Fred, Sam, Julie.

Vets want
personalization
regardless of the channel.

Next steps

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- Future research areas
  - What is the drop off point until people lose patience and move to another channel
  - Outreach to a generation that believes in 'people first' channel
  - Metrics for desktop vs. mobile interaction rates

- Conduct controlled study in staging environment with 100 participants, in 10 different segments
  - Synthesize and analyze survey responses

- Conduct moderated screen reader study in staging environment with 2-4 participants

Questions?