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From Bus Uncle to BotDistrikt

Abhilash MURTHY

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How Abhilash Murthy turned a fun project into a successful chatbot company

Conventional wisdom tells us that if you want to be successful, you need to be focused on a single goal. However, if you look at how successful start-ups like Facebook, GitHub, and MailChimp have evolved, many of them have grown out of fun projects. This unconventional path of success, which is centred on testing and learning, helps budding entrepreneurs to get feedback while improving their products and services at the same time.

Despite being only 29 years of age, **Abhilash Murthy** is an example of an entrepreneur who has used the testing and learning experimental approach for developing a popular chatbot "Bus Uncle", which initially started as a fun project, to building a successful chatbot company "BotDistrikt" offering chatbots-as-a-service. And he was able to accomplish all of these milestones in just two years!

BUS UNCLE

While he was working fulltime for TradeGecko, Murthy created Bus Uncle as a fun project to solve a simple problem: "When is the bus coming?". He didn't want to use an app. Neither did he want a complicated solution. He just wanted to ask someone when the bus was coming.

Since Facebook Messenger had just launched chatbots on its platform, Murthy decided to jump on the bandwagon to solve this problem. In the process of creating this chatbot, he realised that he didn't want to create just another chatbot that typically gives robotic answers. Instead, he decided that his chatbot should be like a human being and someone he could talk to. According to him: "When people want to find out about something, they typically engage in a conversation and ask someone."

Trained as a software engineer, Murthy hacked out the Bus Uncle prototype over one weekend in October 2016. Before launching Bus Uncle, he got many of his friends and colleagues to test it out. In the process of testing and learning, Abhilash's original faceless chatbot evolved into Bus Uncle, a chatbot that personifies the demeanour of a typical Singaporean bus captain: grumpy, narky but helpful.

Murthy launched Bus Uncle to the public on 23 October 2016 on his Facebook page. Despite little interest in the first few days, Bus Uncle became quite popular when it was featured on Mothership, a local online media platform. Within a day, Bus Uncle went from having about 100 users to more than 8,000 users.

This huge surge of users nearly crashed the web server that hosted Bus Uncle. Acting swiftly, Murthy reached out to his colleagues to learn about web server architecting to handle large amounts of users and data. And by Day 30 of the launch, the technology architecture was more robust and resilient.

Why do users love Bus Uncle? Users love Bus Uncle because he is witty, sarcastic, funny, informative, and most of all, local and relatable. When asked when the bus is coming, his responses would typically be peppered with lah's, ah's, aiyo's, jialat's, walao's – which are the commonly used Singlish slangs. He might even ask you to lim kopi (drink coffee in Hokkien) if the wait for the bus is more than 15 minutes.

Despite the initial success, Murthy did not stop there. He continued to humanise Bus Uncle's responses by monitoring the conversational flows between Bus Uncle and the users. He added new features such as image recognition AI (artificial intelligence) to help users take photos of the bus stop for Bus Uncle to capture the bus stop number. Another feature that was added enabled Bus Uncle to give directional information for getting from point A to point B, as well as to give the estimated travelling time for the different modes of transportation including bus, MRT (mass rapid transit) and taxi. Murthy also made Bus Uncle available on two additional messaging apps – Telegram and Google Assistant. By November 2018, Bus Uncle had acquired 238,200 users.

When asked why Bus Uncle has been so successful, Murthy responded: "Three simple reasons. Bus Uncle personifies the typical Singaporean bus captain and he speaks Singlish. And just like how you would talk to any human being, the conversations you have with Bus Uncle is totally non-linear. Finally and most importantly, Bus Uncle gives you the answers you need."

FORAY INTO ADVERTISING

In merely four months, Bus Uncle had become Singapore's most popular chatbot. And many organisations including BBC, McDonald's, the Health Promotion Board approached Murthy to advertise their brands on the chatbot.

Unlike how most advertising is done, which is essentially pop-up ads, Murthy did not want to follow suit because this form of advertising is intrusive and it would dilute Bus Uncle's personality and brand. Instead he responded to these organisations by conveying his interest in experimenting with conversational advertising – a form of soft advertising as the targeted messaging would be embedded at the logical point of the conversation.

As an example, when McDonald's launched Durian McFlurry in July 2018, Murthy programmed Bus Uncle to promote Durian McFlurry whenever the temperature hit 30 degrees Celsius by linking the chatbot to real-time weather readings from the National Environmental Agency (NEA).

Despite embarking on advertising, Bus Uncle's popularity continued to surge. By September 2018, Bus Uncle had become Singapore's first AI influencer. It was at this time that Murthy decided to leave his job at TradeGecko and focus fulltime on Bus Uncle.

CHATBOT DEVELOPMENT BUSINESS

As a way of promoting Bus Uncle, Murthy became a frequent speaker at conferences and key technological events. When the news about Bus Uncle spread, additional organisations started to reach out to him. However, this time, the requests were not for advertising, rather they were to get him to develop conversational chatbots for them. One organisation that asked Murthy to develop a chatbot is the National Heritage Board (NHB).

The charter of the NHB is to increase Singaporean's knowledge of the country's rich heritage, history and culture. Despite easy accessibility and availability of information, many Singaporeans still do not know much about Singapore's rich heritage. This was the main reason why the NHB wanted a chatbot that speaks like Bus Uncle to provide bite-sized information about Singapore's unique heritage and interesting facts about the heritage sites.

This led Murthy to develop the Heritage Granny – Singapore's first chatbot por por (grandmother in Cantonese). Heritage Granny is like your grandmother and she has lived long enough to know

everything about Singapore's heritage. If you want to know, say, the "Gan Clan Association" in Chinatown, Heritage Granny can tell you all about it including the genealogy of the surname Gan, which apparently can be traced back to the imperial line and Confucius!

Heritage Granny is also a location based chatbot. If you were walking along Orchard Road, Heritage Granny would offer you interesting stories about the heritage sites along Orchard Road. She also provides information about museums, events, monuments and the weather.

Like Bus Uncle, talking to Heritage Granny is like talking to a human being and is appealing to both adults and children.

BOTDISTRIKT

As the interest in Murthy's work grew, Murthy found himself juggling multiple roles – managing the products, acquiring new clients and managing the existing clients' needs – creating conversational advertising, as well as building chatbots. In order to grow and scale his business further, Murthy realised that he needed to find a co-founder to help him.

This led him to join Entrepreneur First, an international firm that is focused on helping entrepreneurs find co-founders while helping them to test out their ideas and work with multiple potential co-founders. Even though Murthy was not successful in finding a co-founder through Entrepreneur First, he learned an important lesson about scalability and driving future growth for his chatbot business.

This was why he revamped his business model and ventured into offering chatbots-as-a-service. It was at this time when he approached **Chan Yin Yin**, his friend who initially helped him in the development of Bus Uncle to join him as a Co-Founder of BotDistrikt and Chief Operating Officer, especially to drive business development, operations and customer success.

Shortly after, the two co-founders launched BotDistrikt to provide Singapore's first self-service platform that enables non-coders and non-technical people to easily create chatbots and deploy them to commonly used platforms such as Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Google Assistant and WeChat. In other words, non-coders and non-technical people can test and learn how to build an effective and interactive chatbot. The subscription service that BotDistrikt offers – leverages natural language processing (NLP) and includes tried and tested, and pre-programmed stories and rules to make chatbots more interesting, unique and most importantly, human.

TESTING AND LEARNING

The story of Abhilash Murthy is an interesting showcase of how testing and learning has helped him to turn a fun project to becoming a CEO of a successful chatbot company.

This story shows that individual companies can adopt the testing and learning approach to improve their products and services, as well as offer this experimental approach as a service to their customers.

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