How to Engage & Retain Customers for Your Alexa Skills

Introduction

When designing skills, we aim to create experiences that are both engaging and valuable to the customer.

If we can accomplish this, the likelihood that we'll be able to retain a customer increases. This is a good thing, as it will ultimately drive greater brand affinity and an overall more positive relationship between your clients/brand partners and their customers. When we design toward retention, which is what this Spotlight is about, we can create stickier, more valuable experiences.

Retention is a reflection of skill quality. It indicates if people are using and enjoying your skill, which is a key factor in understanding the short and long term value of the skill itself. Retention has a compounding effect – if you can retain a certain percent of your audience better, your audience will inherently grow.

This Retention Spotlight will help your agency teams better design with retention in mind, creating more valuable and impactful voice experiences for your clients and brand partners – and ultimately, their customers.

In this Spotlight, you will learn:

☑ **How to measure and monitor** your skill's retention performance

☑ **How to design toward and optimize** your Alexa skills for retention

So, What IS **Retention** Exactly and How Do You Drive It?

By understanding what retention really means and how to look for it, you can create better voice experiences for your client and brand partners' customers.

After you have succeeded at acquiring customers and bringing them to use your skill, how do you make sure they come back? Retention, in a nutshell, means customer usage over time. When we see that customers use an Alexa skill multiple times, that's a cue that it is a delightful experience that provides value, utility, or entertainment to them. When customers return to your skill, it's a great experience for the customer and a valuable customer interaction for the brand.

We as humans need to be *motivated* to act, but we also don't want to do things that are hard or require a lot of effort, which leads us to the following principles you should consider when designing and building skills for your client and brand partners:

LOW FRICTION

HIGH-QUALITY CONTENT

MECHANISMS THAT SPARK REPEAT USAGE

With all this said, it's important to keep in mind that designing for retention begins at day one in the ideation phase. You should consider these core principles, as well as things like:

- What can voice do uniquely better for the customer, that is still related to my client or brand partners' business, than other channels in their ecosystem.

- What use cases for a voice experience would make a specific customer action 10x better/easier/more efficient than what exists or what could be handled via a web/app/another channel.

It doesn't end here, however; **optimizing your skill for retention continues throughout the skill creation process and long after you've launched.** In the following pages, we'll dive into these three principles in more detail and share examples of how you can design, measure, and optimize for each of these areas.

Ensuring
Your Skill Has
Low Friction

The first step in designing and/or optimizing a skill to increase retention is eliminating sources of friction in the experience.

Friction will deter users from coming back to your client or brand partner's skill. Over repeated usage, minor annoyances in the experience can be enough to turn a customer away – and for good.
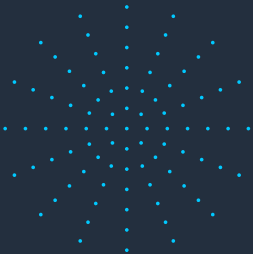
Friction can manifest both in and out of your skill experience:

IN-SKILL FRICTION POINTS

- Functional bugs
- Usability issues
- Invocation issues
- Recognition (language model) issues
- Confusing/poorly crafted prompts or responses
- Overly verbose/repetitive prompts or responses

EXTERNAL FACTORS

- Product Availability
- API Connectivity
- Change in Marketing
- Changes with Voice Talent

From day one, even before you have a skill in market, you should be thinking through the customer's needs

and identify what will bring them the most value. As the skill lives on, you should continue to monitor its performance, look for pain points, and identify optimization opportunities.

To Check for Friction, There Are a Variety of Tools and Techniques You Can Leverage:

CUSTOMER REVIEWS

- An easy first step you can take in understanding how your customers are responding to your skill is by looking at customer reviews in the Alexa Skill Store (weekly or more often).

- Make sure to update your description both in the store and in the skill itself on what your skill offers if you make any changes that address a customer concern so they know the skill has been updated.
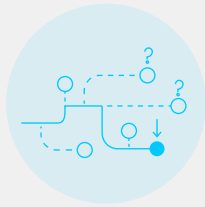
INTERACTION PATH ANALYSIS

- This tool is available on the developer portal and is another great way to regularly check where points of friction may lay.

- It indicates where drop-off occurred in the customer's experience, which may indicate a point of friction, as well as how many drop-offs have occurred giving you a sense of volume against that point of friction.
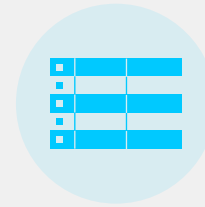
INTENT HISTORY

- A third but equally directional tool you can use is the Intent History, also available on the developer portal.

- This can show you when certain intents were noted (such as "stop") or show you when your skill returned an "I don't know" answer which may indicate a path you have not accounted for.

In addition to these three areas, you should create and track performance against your client or brand partners' business goals. In doing so, you should **consider the impact on their business goals and objectives, feedback and insights** from user-testing, and operational monitoring to track errors in your skill.

Creating
High-Quality Content

Divserse, engaging, and frequently updated content is another critical element to ensuring longer-term retention of your customers as it relates to their usage of your skill.

High-quality content motivates customers to use skills. It is the life-blood of your skill, and in being so, it needs to be framed, contextualized and designed for engagement.

From day one, you should frame your content for and around your customer, and after your skill is live and in-market, you need to hone its content for relevance and engagement. What this means is that your skill's content should be refreshed and optimized to ensure it stays current, relevant, and in line with the customer's needs and the unique value of your skill.

Here are a few key ways you can encourage repeat usage of your skill though high-quality content:

CONTEXT THROUGH SITUATIONAL DESIGN

○ As you are designing your skill's experience, be mindful not only of first-time users, but also of customers who may be coming back to your skill for the 10th, 100th or 1,000th time.

PERSONALIZATION (SKILL-BASED VS EXTERNAL DATA)

○ Learn about each customer through their usage patterns and optimize for the way they work. Consider streamlining flows where able based on customer habits.

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

○ Quantity does not necessarily equal quality. It's

important to keep content relevant, understand depth and keep an eye out for content exhaustion.

DYNAMIC CONTENT

○ The fresher the content the better. Consider seasonal dynamic – such as a skill that is tied to a specific sporting event, season, film/TV show airing, etc.

○ Ask yourself if the experience of using the skill gets better or worse with repeated usage. Design experiences that grow with and reward your loyal customers.

A RECORDED VOICE VS POLLY VOICES VS TTS

○ Pre-recorded audio by professional voice talent that can reflect more of the brand's personality is usually preferred over Alexa's TTS. Make sure it is high-quality and follows guidelines for volume and technical specifications.

SUCCESS STORY
Headspace skill for Alexa

Headspace leverages a variety of content best practices in their Alexa Skill. For one, just as they do in the mobile app-based version of their platform, they use the voice of their founder, Andy Puddicombe, to narrate their Skill experience. In addition, they leverage personalization and dynamic content to provide a richer, more 1:1 experience with each customer.

Sparking
Re-engagement
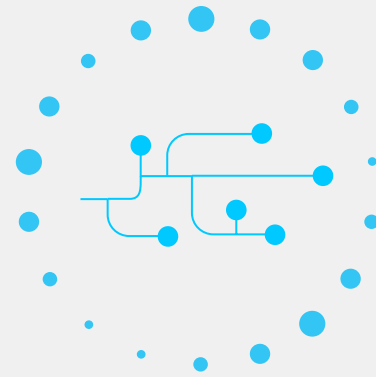
Sparks can be both in-skill as well as external factors that motivate both first-use initiation and repeat interaction.

Sparks can affect the customer's desire – or motivation – to take an action. They are not a silver bullet, however, and can be a point of frustration if used incorrectly. Balance is key for an engaging and delightful customer experience.

Customers need to be prompted to take an action – they rarely will do so spontaneously. That's where sparks come into play. When you think about sparks, you should think about them in two different ways:

IN SKILL SPARKS

Elements and techniques that prompt customer usage, re-engagement, and ultimately, retention.

EXTERNAL SPARKS

Out of skill elements, often related to your client or brand partners' larger ecosystem, that drive awareness and usage of your skill, such as marketing, notifications, SMS, and more.
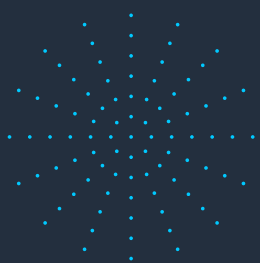
It is important to think about sparks from your brand's ecosystem standpoint – in other words, not solely ones that come from the skill.

In-skill sparks are diverse, all working toward the common goal of driving retention and engagement. Here are some factors that spark customer engagement:

DEVELOPMENT & ACCOMPLISHMENT

- The feeling of making progress, developing skills, and eventually overcoming challenges.
- An example is a credit report service that allows you to view your score and report, helping you improve it over time.

OWNERSHIP & POSSESSION

- Taking ownership and making what they own more valuable.
- An example is a hotel loyalty program that allows you to gain and use points based on purchases and stays.
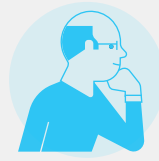
LOSS & AVOIDANCE

- The desire to prevent negative outcomes.
- An example is how people use social networks to avoid missing content.

CREATIVITY & FEEDBACK

- The opportunity to express one's creativity, see results, and receive feedback.
- An example is a product whose very nature is about promoting creativity and exploration (like kids toys, building blocks, etc.).

UNPREDICTABILITY & CURIOSITY

- The desire of wanting to find out what will happen next.
- An example is a subscription box that contains new items in each delivery.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE & RELATEDNESS

- A sense of seeking acceptance, social response, validation, mentorship, companionship, or competition.
- An example is a fitness service that encourages friendly competition between users as they work toward goals and complete challenges.

SCARCITY

- Demand increases when availability is limited, either by quantity or duration.
- An example is a time-based offer – like a deal of the day.

EPIC MEANING & CALLING

- The belief that one is participating in something greater than oneself.
- An example could be a charitable foundation that matches a customer's purchase and donates a product to someone in need.

Incorporating these sparks into your skill's experience – and at the very least designing with them in mind – can help increase retention and engagement with your experience.

As noted, there are also a variety of external sparks you should keep in mind that can affect how customer's are exposed to or encouraged to reengage with your skill.

External sparks can include:

MARKETING, like advertising and social that promote your skill.

EMAILS, like branded newsletters that have specific CTAs to invoke your skill.

SMS, or text-based alerts, that can be used as follow up mechanisms post-engagement.

ALEXA MECHANISMS, like proactive events and reminders, that can alert customers when something new is happening with their skill.
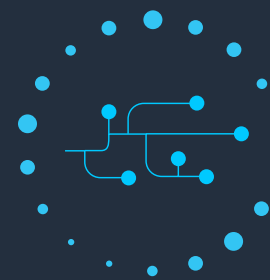
Let's Get Started!

At the end of the day, when you're designing or optimizing your skill for engagement and ultimately long-term retention, look for ways to:

Remove Friction

Optimize Content

Add Sparks

If you can integrate and begin to master these techniques, you will be able to create a much more enticing experience for your customers. And always remember to experiment and iterate!