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# Sensay Uses Artificial Intelligence to Connect People Seeking Advice and Ideas



Chatbots have captured the attention of venture capitalists as mobile technology matures and people download fewer apps.

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**By Cat Zakrzewski**

Aug. 2, 2016 7:30 a.m. ET

A chatbot-messaging platform is betting there are some questions people just can't ask their Facebook friends or iPhone contacts.

Sensay Inc. uses natural language processing to connect a one person to another anonymously through messaging apps such as Facebook Inc.'s Messenger and Kik Interactive Inc. The startup raised \$4.5 million in seed funding led by Norwest Venture Partners.

Sensay conversations can be about anything from relationship advice to restaurant recommendations. When you start a Sensay chat, the chatbot asks if you need something or know something. People can type in such phrases as "Need

recommendations for a book to read on vacation.” Within minutes, a chat begins with another person who has told Sensay they “know” about books.

Chatbots are software agents that use artificial intelligence to understand what you type or say and then respond with an answer. They can live in chat platforms like Facebook Messenger, Slack and Line. Some can be used via SMS text messages, and others are stand-alone apps.

Chief Executive Ariel Jalali said the Los Angeles-based company has more than one million users. He added 50% of those people use Sensay to both ask and answer questions.

“People are connecting in serendipitous ways we wouldn’t have imagined,” Mr. Jalali said.

The team believes Sensay will be able to help people talk about topics that may be uncomfortable to post about publicly, like how to reach a custody agreement following a divorce. After each interaction with a human, Sensay prompts the other user to rate the person they just spoke to and report any abuse, limiting negativity on the platform.

As chatbots or virtual assistants come to consumers, Sensay is one of several early entrants that has combined artificial intelligence and humans to make an experience that feels like a human to human conversation. While advances in natural language processing have led to improved chatbots, many of the emerging chatbots that venture capitalists have backed still rely on human communication. They automate parts of the conversation to help those humans talk to more people more quickly. As more conversations occur, they train machine learning algorithms and make the automated conversation better and better.

Chatbots have captured the attention of venture capitalists as mobile matures and people download fewer apps. Chat platforms like Facebook Inc. see chatbots as a possible alternative to the Apple Inc. App Store.

Despite the recent flurry of investment activity in bots, it remains to be seen if the medium will take off among consumers. By combining both artificial intelligence and humans, companies like Sensay are avoiding some of the pitfalls that other early chatbots have fallen into. Microsoft Corp.’s early foray with a bot named Tay was deemed a failure after pranksters prompted her to spew anti-Semitic comments.

Many of the chatbots that have raised funding recently, like Mezi, are automating tasks that previously would be completed by customer service and sales representatives. Sensay is unique because it connects people to their peers and others with similar interests. This brings to the messaging world the types of conversations that typically take place on anonymous forums like Reddit.

Sensay declined to comment on whether it generates revenue, but the company is still considering different business models. It may one day rely on transactions in the chats, such as virtual coins. It has also developed a method to use paywalls within the chat service.

Mr. Jalali said that down the line, more of the Sensay experience may become automated. He declined to elaborate but said the future of automated conversations are less like the dystopian future presented in the “Terminator” and more like the friendly assistant R2D2 popularized by the “Star Wars” films.

Sensay has raised \$6 million to date. Greycroft Partners, Sweet Capital, NHN Investment Corp., Draper Associates and other existing investors also participated in the round. The company plans to use the funding for international expansion.

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