

Your order is one chat away

Artificial intelligence chat bot Niki.ai aims to simplify ordering by cutting hassles in installing multiple applications. Success will depend on how fast it grows into newer categories and expands networks, writes **M Saraswathy**



FACT BOX

Name: Niki.ai

Founded: 2015

Co-founders: Keshav Prawasi, Nitin Babel, Sachin Jaiswal and Shishir Modi

Area of functioning: Artificial Intelligence to drive chat bots

Investors: Ratan Tata, Ronnie Screwvala's Unilazer Ventures

Niki.ai co-founders (from left) Sachin Jaiswal, Nitin Babel, Keshav Prawasi and Shishir Modi

they get a revenue split, which is between two per cent to 10 per cent of the total transaction.

Companies are also open to this idea. A senior executive at a food ordering company said they could test this on a pilot basis. "Our goal is to generate more orders. If an AI firm can help us do it quicker, then why not?" he added.

Funding and way forward

Now, Ratan Tata has invested in the company, along with Unilazer that did a follow-up round of investment. The amount for both is undisclosed. The company will use the funds to forging partnerships with other merchants.

Jaiswal says the aim is to expand in the existing categories as well as get into newer categories like booking bus tickets and hotel rooms. In the start-up space, where scalability is one of the biggest challenges, Jaiswal adds scalability is the least of the challenges for the company. With a user base of 40,000 that grew from 500 in October, Niki.ai said they are seeing an average of 50 per cent repeats in the same month, which shows high loyalty.

"Awareness is a challenge and will largely depend on how India grows as a community and how people are reacting/adapting to AI," he says.

In the AI space, where there is not much competition, they have the advantage of being a niche app, say angels investing in this space. How fast they are able to grow and increase users for all services is yet to be seen.

Recharging your phone, bill payments, ordering food, cab booking or even laundry services online would require you to install a multitude of applications on the mobile phone. Which of these could be made available on one platform, where you are not even required to pick up the phone and talk to the service providers? That is the list of the services that artificial intelligence (AI) platform Niki.ai aims to offer.

An AI chat bot that aims to simplify your order experience, Niki.ai now has a range of services to choose from. AI refers to a branch of computer science that depicts intelligence exhibited by machines that enables them to perform tasks that would ordinarily require human intervention. The start-up launched with the Beta version a year ago in June 2015 and had received funding not only from Ronnie Screwvala's Unilazer Ventures but also from Ratan Tata.

Early days

We started working on the idea in January 2015, says Sachin Jaiswal, co-founder and chief executive officer of Niki.ai. The initial development of Niki started in a small room in a house in Udaipur, the owners of which didn't have any use for that space.

The four co-founders, Nitin Babel (chief operating officer), Jaiswal, Keshav Prawasi (chief technology officer) and Shishir Modi (chief managing officer), are engineers. However, Jaiswal said applications such as Siri have primarily been using voice and did not focus much on customer engagement.

"We decided that if we have to build AI, we'll have to start with a bounded problem. We started with ordering and since each brand has a different user interface; we thought of building this product. It is like talking to a salesperson for multiple products," says Jaiswal.

Niki.ai started with recharge services when they launched the Beta version in June 2015 via an Android application. Later, they realised the product had to be refined and the final version of the product was launched in October 2015.

How it works

Once you download the Niki application on your mobile, it can be used to make multiple types of transactions. Services available include phone recharge, bill payments, cab booking, food orders (from Burger King) and laundry services. During the Indian Premier League cricket tournament, latest scores were also

available.

The platform can pick up your location using GPS to provide services.

Jaiswal said the advantage is that with their app, one would not have to install many applications. He added these apps are heavy, so from a user's standpoint, it saves phone memory space. The aim is to cut down on steps and bring one simple chat application for users.

Business model

For each order, they get commissions. Jaiswal said they did a proof of concept in food so they could understand how the customer would look at it. Now the idea is to tie-up with likes of Swiggy or Zomato to offer all the local restaurants, according to him. Niki operates on a channel partnership model. So, for every fulfilled order for any business,

EXPERT TAKE



Chat interface has a lot of promise, but right now, expectations are sky high! Also, for some situations, a well-designed form may prove more appropriate, especially for simple tasks. Unlike today's web/mobile user interface, communicating through conversation is simpler, personal and effective. Even though Niki.ai has a conversational interface, it needs to improve in terms of

product simplification. I would love to have a butler robot that does what I say. But, I can not have a robot that can only do few simple things, ex Echo, Google now. It is important to see how many things it can handle and how simple it is for a user. Unnecessary statements might lead to over expectations and underwhelm the user.

We are at an exploration phase right now about AI. It has become a buzz word, used very lightly. It leads to unrealistic expectations and disappoints the user. And

second, businesses want to use AI but are not prepared to gather the required data to build it. We are trying to understand where there is an utmost value for today's AI and where it can impact tomorrow. If any enterprise wants to use AI, the key differentiator is preparing for it for tomorrow!

We definitely see an ecosystem building; competition and collaboration will coexist as the technology and community matures. Many people are trying to invent new names to the same

algorithms and pitch it as a differentiator. It is part of the hype. This should change. The key focus should be product and customer and technology is just an enabler. Enterprises and Entrepreneurs should focus on building a good product using technology. The best product is defined by customer experience and adoption, not by what technology it is made of.

Vinay Kumar, co-founder and CEO, Arya.ai, an artificial intelligence start-up

LAUNCH PAD

Harvesting rainwater



Thinkphi co-founders (from left) Priya Vakil Choksi and Samit Choksi

If you believe in a sustainable world, here's the way to recycle water and tap solar energy. Ulta Chaata lets you harvest rainwater and in dry months works as a solar panel that can light your homes, factories or businesses.

The company behind this is Thinkphi, a Mumbai-based green technology start-up. A single unit of Ulta Chata can help you harvest upto 100,000 litres of water and capture energy with maximum peak power of 1.5 Kw. Founded by Samit Choksi and Priya Vakil Choksi in 2015, Thinkphi recently raised an undisclosed amount of funds from angel investor Nimmagadda Prasad, who has also invested in Sachin Tendulkar's ISL team Kerala Blasters and earlier in Matrix Laboratories, Maa TV and Care Hospitals.

The company's flagship product Ulta Chaata, is basically a canopy that captures rain water and then filters it using an integrated filtration unit. It also works as a solar electricity generation system to provide lighting at night. It is also IoT (Internet of Things)-enabled, to collect useful environmental data.

According to Choksi, the product is best fitted for smart cities and two cities have bought around 70 units of it. Factories and industries are another target category.

Godrej has installed Ulta Chaata in its car parking area.

The price of each unit starts at ₹99,000 and varies according to the capacity of the product. It will start selling product actively from September and aims to sell 200 units of it. The start-up aims to launch another product by the end of 2017 and set up office in Singapore and the US. "Our main focus is on creation of intellectual property," says Choksi. It hopes to start making profits by mid-2017.

SNEHA SAGAR