Dick Maggiore: AI, the next big thing

By Dick Maggiore Special to The Canton Repository
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Few would argue the impact of the wheel, the printing press, steam and gasoline engines, the telephone, electricity and the light bulb, nuclear power, the airplane, penicillin, the computer and the internet.

Major inventions have shaped human development and powered society, culture and civilization. Each new invention is a magnificent accomplishment that leaves us marveling, "How can we top that?"

In fact, declared the commissioner of U.S. Patent Office in 1899, "Everything that can be invented has been invented."

As we look back, we see he was wrong. Invention continues at breakneck speed, particularly in the world of technology. We barely had embraced mobile and the cloud when along came artificial intelligence, or AI, as it is already familiarly known.

AI is the capacity for computer programs to learn, decide and mimic intelligent human behavior. It is fair to say this latest disruptive technology has set a course to affect absolutely every category of our economy.

Put simply, machines now can figure out how to figure it out. They can change what they do without being specifically programmed.

All of this invention is fascinating and scary at the same time. And it is having an impact on **marketing**. But before we get into marketing, let's pause here to put our thinking in context.

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Many worry we'll be knocked out of the workforce by some form of AI, like a robot. Others worry AI might make bad, or even destructive, decisions. What do we do to face our fears?

A vote for 'STEAM' to get AI right

Rather than hope AI slows down or gets regulated under control, let's encourage our kids to work smart with technology, engineering and computer programming. Let's figure out how to encourage and teach creativity and innovation at the same time.

We think it can happen. We think we can go forward with artificial intelligence in a context that melds innovation and creativity in a manner that is productive for people and society.

We're encouraged that here we have ArtsinStark, thinkers and doers who already are blazing the trail that connects creativity and innovation.

You might be familiar with the STEM. It stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics. We're advocates for adding "A" to STEM so that it becomes STEAM: science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics.

We believe STEAM will accelerate student inquiry, dialogue and critical thinking. Creativity is critical as we continue to learn lessons and gain reinforcement about the importance of the human perspective in technological breakthroughs.

With that in mind, let's look at marketing. AI most definitely is affecting the way products move through the marketplace.

Amazon's artificial intelligence device, Alexa, is selling like hotcakes. Alexa is on its way to becoming our shopping concierge.

Amazon, Alibaba and Baidu are using AI to predict our buying behavior and serve up products they think we would like. Have you noticed how ads seem to follow you around the internet?

With Google Lens, you can point your smartphone at a restaurant menu in another language and translate it. Then, Google Assistant might provide pictures of the food choices. Google has so much of our personal data from Gmail, Google Docs and Google Calendar, not to mention its search engine, giving it a big advantage in the AI category.

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg said, "So the biggest thing that we're focused on with AI is building computer services that have better perception than people. So the basic human senses like seeing, hearing, language, core things that we do. I think it's possible to get to the point in the next five to 10 years where we have computer systems that are better than people at each of those things."

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Marketers must cope with the fact that sooner or later, AI will disrupt every business or organization of any size. As artificial intelligence technology continues to penetrate the world of marketing, the challenge will be to channel it in a manner that minimizes the opportunity for unintended consequences.

Many companies, especially businesses selling to other businesses, are using marketing automation at some level. Platforms such as Salesforce and SharpSpring automate email campaigns. The "if this, then that" logic takes over. People figuratively sit and watch it all go down.

More than robots

For decades, we have witnessed robots eliminate jobs at manufacturing companies. Now all this data, computing power and algorithms are moving in on the knowledge-based jobs.

Grocery store self-checkouts are common. Automation is replacing cashiers. Bank tellers might be next. Now we have robo-banks — brick and mortar locations with no people.

The future for appraisers, especially for home mortgages, also looks dismal. As the current corps of appraisers retires, there are fewer in the pipeline.

We already getting comfortable with algorithms helping to point us home or serving up ads of products and services that AI believes we want. But are we comfortable with algorithms making decisions on whether or not we get approved for life insurance or a bank loan?

What if the algorithm learned to make credit risk decisions based on gender or race without it even knowing the gender or race. It could make inferences resulting in unintended consequences.

I believe the hope for proper perspective in the development of AI requires creativity and insight as checks and balance against the possibility of machines that can take us down the wrong road. Let's make sure our new generations have the STEAM to get the job done properly.

Dick Maggiore is president and CEO of Innis Maggiore, founded in Canton in 1974 and today the nation's leading positioning ad agency, building strong brands for companies in competitive markets here and across the country.