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DIGITAL ASSISTANT WITH A HEART: TINKA AT THE MOBILE WORLD CONGRESS 2017 IN BARCELONA



Between 27 February and 2 March, everybody who was anybody in telecommunications flocked to Barcelona for the [Mobile World Congress](#). Held every year since 1987, it is considered the most important trade fair of its kind in Europe. 108,000 people from 208 countries visited the event, while 3,500 members of the international press reported on new trends, innovative products and services. **Joachim Stegmann**, Future Communication Team Leader for Deutsche Telekom, said, “This is one of the most important fairs for us. All large companies are represented here. It is where we can have the greatest reach, and make contact with important decision makers.”

Even if 5G was the focus of the Deutsche Telekom exhibition stand, it was a very special lady who captured the hearts of visitors on the company’s behalf: Tinka.

Actually, people know the alien from Austria from the [website of T-Mobile Austria](#). In Barcelona, however, she presented her 3D heart to viewers as a life-sized 3D hologram: a special effect that captivated everyone. Visitors stopped and started talking to Telekom employees, they curiously moved in for a closer look at the alien, and they also talked to her. For example, they asked her to name the current US president or his predecessor. The computer voice answered these questions just as easily as those concerning the exhibition stand or Deutsche Telekom.

“Like big data, artificial intelligence is an enabling technology that can be found everywhere, in all industries,” says Stegmann. “Different assistants have different characteristics. It was important for us to have an eye-catcher that effectively drew attention to the trending topic of AI. There are personal assistants such as Siri for smartphones, but we did not want to display that kind of thing. We wanted to present a company assistant.” An assistant who advises customers about products and services from Deutsche Telekom and helps with faults: in other words, “A real digital enterprise assistant.”

Tinka was not only a text chatbot for the trade fair; she was the centre of attention as a 3D hologram. While back in Austria, the Tinka chatbot uses text chat to answer customer questions about mobile phones, products, and services – and to process day-to-day requests – the English-language counterpart for the MWC was a different concept. In this instance, the digital assistant spoke about and also mastered everyday topics. Spoken questions for Tinka were transformed into text using Google speech recognition. Within just a fraction of a second, she interpreted the text, sent it to the Wolfram Alpha and Knox knowledge databases, and produced an answer.

Stegmann notes, “This attracted people who are engaged in this topic. Our booth enjoyed consistently high attendance. Everybody was curious and got involved.” Working with language recognition at a noisy trade fair presented its own challenges, “Unwired speech is impossible this situation,” says Stegmann. “We used special microphones which functioned almost perfectly.” Tinka also responded to gestures. As such and without exception, people were positive and excited in their response. There were, however, some guests who expected rather too much of the poor alien and asked questions that she could not answer, “AI systems know only things for which they have been trained,” chuckles Stegmann. “Many people expect too much. They think that an AI needs to do and know everything. This is of course absolutely impossible. I suspect that science-fiction may have given them a false impression.”

One of the most commonly asked questions was whether there would be holograms in the shops anytime soon, “Of course such things are not beyond the realms of possibility; however, this was not our focus. We wanted to create a visionary representation that attracted attention. Therefore, most visitors understood that 3D Tinka was a way of promoting AI in customer care and sales,” Stegmann explains, adding, “We now have to keep this curiosity alive, and continue to offer small teasers that demonstrate what we are working on.”

In general, artificial intelligence developers face the minor issue that nobody can see what is going on behind the scenes: AI is like a black box. Stegmann observes, “The advantage of AI is more matter-of-fact than people think: basically you can better process large data sets.” This explains why exhibits such as the 3D hologram are important. They enable emotional contact with something abstract.

Like the trade fair employees, the team was there for visitors from dawn until dusk. The stream of visitors who approached the team was almost constant, “Sometimes we had to split up and advise visitors in groups,” says Diorella Stern, who manned the stand with her colleagues. Some people wanted to know how they could build up Artificial Intelligence within their company. Others at the stand tried out the online Tinka chatbot on the T-Mobile Austria website – they were of the opinion that it outperformed Siri.

“This is because the focus of the eLIZA project is artificial intelligence for service and customer requests. As a result, we can better fulfil particular expectations,” says Benjamin Bauer, who was also on hand to answer questions.

The 3D hologram is now taking a well-earned break; however, the online version of Tinka is in constant service. “Let’s see which trade fair we will choose for reactivating 3D Tinka again – maybe the IFA in Berlin. She will certainly be able to do something new the next time around. We want to stay interesting,” Stegmann says with a smile.

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