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BY ROBERT STEPHENS

Misadventures in Artificial Intelligence

HELLO, FELLOW SALES warriors – those helping Mrs. Gotrocks pick out the perfect bathroom suite and receiving all the calls and emails from her designer, architect and builder. This is my field report on using artificial intelligence to enhance my ability to sell toilets and doorknobs.

To clarify, I am not an AI expert. I am a very experienced salesperson in the decorative plumbing and hardware industry. I have been in the industry for 35 years, the last 26 at Chown Hardware in Portland, Oregon. I have amassed a large customer base over the years and average over 100 emails a day. Over this past year I have had a business account with ChatGPT, listened to AI podcasts, am on the AI forums on Reddit and have talked to that team in Chicago everyone seems to know.

When I first got my ChatGPT account, I came up with a short list of what I would like it to do for me. What I really want to do is to save time, as time is my most valuable commodity during the work week. I decided I wanted AI to help me with the following tasks: Build a GPT that can build a hardware schedule from a set of plans in PDF, build a sink finder GPT, do an image search to find items for customers, and help me clean up training modules I made for new hires during the pandemic.

GAUGING ACCURACY

My first order of business was to build a GPT that could make a hardware schedule from a PDF of house plans. Writing up hardware quotes from plans can eat up a lot of time, and I really wanted to shave this down. I loaded up training manuals. I loaded up hardware catalogs. I added detailed instructions for what type of output I was looking for. I read a short guide on how to make better GPTs.

I had just been emailed a set of plans for a larger residential project that would become the test set for the next year. I loaded up the plans into the GPT with some basic instructions and hit send. In about 30 seconds, a hardware schedule appeared showing door opening name, handing, function and door stops needed. It included a tally at the bottom of the chart. I was so impressed, at least until I opened up the plans. The output appeared to be about 70% correct. My personal brand to my customers is accuracy and efficiency, and 70% was not going to cut it. I was looking for more like 98%.

I worked on my GPT to get better results. I would then put in the same set of plans and instructions and test the output over time. What I discovered was that the results would vary wildly from month to month, and over time the output seemed to get worse.

Was ChatGPT getting dumber over time? My guess is that the resources that ChatGPT used to build my output had been throttled back on my basic business account as the number of users grew. I talked to the team in Chicago and they were getting similar results.

Then DeepSeek dropped. My results started drastically improving – not because I was using DeepSeek, but maybe because ChatGPT got better in the face of a real competitor. I recently ran the exact same plans and instructions into my GPT. On an entire large residential project it missed four doors, mis-handed five doors and the totals at the bottom were one off. If AI cannot do a basic count, it is clearly not ready for the task at hand here.

AUTOMATING THE SEARCH

The other GPT I built was a Kitchen Sink Finder. Finding the perfect kitchen sink for some projects can take some time, and I was looking

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to automate this search task. I did not want to search for every sink on the internet, just the brands for which we are the dealer. I decided to load up every sink catalog we are the dealer for into my GPT. This is when I discovered the limitations of a basic business account. It would only let me load up about a dozen catalogs. Fine. I loaded up my 12 favorites and asked to prioritize a few brands when giving results. I would type in something like "find me all 30" white farm sinks." While this started out not being very usable, recently it's giving very good results. I plan on keeping this one in my toolbox.

Doing an image search with AI should be a great time saver. We get sent photos to find parts for something we sold 20 years ago, or to see if we can get one more cabinet pull to match the ones purchased from us years ago. Sometimes the photos get sent to several of us in the showroom and there is always a fun chase to see who can come up with the correct answer first! Well, guess what? AI currently does not have image search ability. I was stunned. This was going to be a huge time saver and make me look like a genius to Mrs. Gotrocks. According to a recent interview on the technology podcast Hard Fork with the CEO of Claude, this task is being heavily requested right now but takes a lot of computing power to do. I am confident that this is a perfect task for AI in the future.

Finally, ChatGPT can help me clean up the 20 training modules I made for new hires during the pandemic. The training modules were five minutes long and designed to give information not easily found elsewhere – things like why door handing and hardware handing can be different, why we care about door swings on mortise locks, etc. ChatGPT immediately excelled at this task. It added graphics, reformatted everything in a more readable format and suggested different wording. I think writing up a document or training module and then asking ChatGPT to zhoosh it up is an excellent use of this technology. If I asked AI to make a training module, it would probably create something nobody would want to use. Asking it to make what I have already created better makes me look like a formatting pro in Microsoft Word.

AI is something we all need to start working with. It is not completely ready for prime time yet, but that day is coming very fast. I relish the day I can crank out a whole house hardware quote in under three minutes that is highly accurate. I will be happy with the help I get with documents and using the sink search GPT I built. The software still needs some very basic functions added. There is not a file system to create files of past queries, and it cannot do a basic image search on the internet. I have successfully used it recently to add groups of fractions together, and to calculate the angle of the backrest of a tub. For that, it worked great. If you have a way to get an accurate hardware schedule out of AI from a set of plans, I hope you can share it with the rest of us!

Full disclosure – No AI was used to generate this report!

With 35 years of industry experience – including 26 years at Chown Hardware – Robert Stephens has built a reputation as an expert and consistent top closer. A University of Arizona graduate, he brings dedication, insight, and authenticity to each client interaction. Based in Portland, OR, Stephens has been happily married for 33 years and is the proud father of a 27-year-old daughter. When he's not helping clients, he enjoys the finer things in life: crafting artisan bread, collecting fountain pens, and soaking in live music.