AI is Essential

One dealer's artificial intelligence journey — so far

by: Jeffrey Foley, Apollo Office Systems

I serve as co-founder and COO of Apollo Office Systems, an office technology dealership based in the heart of our vibrant community, Alvin, Texas. I have always believed that innovation is not just about adopting new tools — it is about serving our customers better while contributing to the greater good.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of serving in positions on local boards, including past chairman of the local planning and economic development commission, and volunteering with fraternal organizations like the Knights of Columbus, and charitable groups focused on youth education and community health. These roles have taught me the value of forward-thinking leadership and balancing business growth with societal impact. It is in this spirit that I share my personal journey with artificial intelligence (AI), a technology that is reshaping not just my company, but the entire office technology dealer channel.

From early stumbles to promising breakthroughs, AI has been a fascinating ride, and I firmly believe it holds transformative potential for our industry. In this article, I will recount some hits and misses, highlight key initiatives (like our use of AI bots for prospecting and major software transitions), and outline our future plans for proactive, AI-driven service delivery.

My First AI Foray

My first foray into AI began modestly about a decade ago, around the time we were navigating significant operational changes at Apollo. In 2014, we made the decision to convert our accounting and ERP systems from QuickBooks to e-automate. This shift was a game-changer for us, streamlining inventory management, service ticketing and billing processes that had become cumbersome under QuickBooks. It allowed us to scale our operations more efficiently, reducing manual errors and improving cash flow visibility.

However, our dealership's transition to e-automate was not without challenges — we underestimated the training curve for our team, leading to a few months of disrupted workflows. That experience planted the seed for exploring AI as a way to automate repetitive tasks and enhance decision-making, although, at the time, AI felt more like science fiction than a practical tool.

An Early AI Miss

One of my earliest "misses" with AI came in 2016 when we experimented with basic chatbots for customer support on our website. We integrated a simple rule-based system to handle common inquiries like toner orders or basic troubleshooting. The hit? It reduced our inbound call volume by about 15% initially, freeing up our service team for more complex issues.

However, the miss was glaring: the chatbot lacked natural language processing (NLP) capabilities, often misunderstanding user queries and frustrating customers with rigid responses. For instance, if a client typed in "printer jam," the chatbot might have defaulted to unrelated suggestions, leading to escalated calls. We quickly shelved it, realizing that AI needed to be more intuitive to truly add value. This taught me a crucial lesson: AI implementation requires careful integration with existing systems and a deep understanding of customer needs. Rushing in without robust testing can erode trust, which is paramount in our dealer channel where relationships drive repeat business.

Post-COVID-19 Pandemic AI

The COVID lockdowns from 2020 through 2023 were devastating to my company. We lost most of our outside sales team members. I conducted hundreds of recruiting interviews and hired half a dozen people who did not stick with us. Undeterred, we pivoted to more targeted AI applications, particularly in sales prospecting — a perennial challenge in the office technology space.

By 2024, we began using AI-powered bots to automate outbound calls, leveraging tools like A.I.S.S. (Artificial Intelligence Sales System) and Sales.ai. These platforms have been a hit, revolutionizing how we connect with potential clients. A.I.S.S., for example, uses voice AI to make initial prospecting calls, leaving voicemails with text and email follow-ups. It integrates seamlessly with many CRMs, logging responses and scoring leads based on engagement levels.

Sales.ai takes it further by contacting prospective customers and directly engaging in a dialog to either set an appointment for us or transfer the prospect directly to sales staff members in the office. In one campaign this year, these bots handled more

than 1,500 calls in a week, generating 40 qualified leads. The efficiency gain is undeniable: Our sales team now focuses on closing deals rather than cold calling.

Of course, there were misses here, too. Early on, we overrelied on the bots without sufficient human oversight, leading to awkward interactions where the AI mispronounced company names or failed to detect sarcasm in responses. We have since refined our approach, incorporating hybrid models where bots handle initial outreach and seamlessly hand off to human reps when nuances arise. This balance has been key, underscoring that AI excels at scale, but thrives when augmented by human empathy.

Ripe for Disruption

These experiences have solidified my view that AI will be profoundly significant to the office technology dealer channel. Our industry, built on managing hardware like printers, copiers and IT infrastructure, is ripe for disruption. Dealers have traditionally operated in a reactive "break/fix" model, responding to service requests after issues arise. But AI enables a proactive paradigm, predicting problems before they disrupt operations and empowering customers with self-service tools.

According to industry reports, proactive IT support can reduce downtime by up to 75% and cut maintenance costs significantly. For dealers, this means shifting from cost centers to strategic partners, fostering deeper client relationships and unlocking new revenue streams through value-added services. In a market squeezed by commoditization and remote work trends, AI is not optional — it is essential for differentiation and survival.

Doubling Down

Looking ahead, Apollo is doubling down on this vision with an ambitious AI framework outlined in our internal proactive outreach standard operating procedure (SOP). Drawing real-time data from our remote monitoring and management (RMM) tool, Ninja One, and the DCA (KPAX or Printanista), we are deploying an agentic AI solution (or platform) called GIDR.ai. This is not just automation; it is intelligent orchestration. GIDR.ai analyzes device data — such as low toner levels, paper jams or impending firmware vulnerabilities — to detect issues preemptively. Using generative AI for root-cause analysis and predictive maintenance, it initiates NLP-driven chat engagements, guiding customers through intuitive self-solve journeys.

For example, if KPAX detects a toner cartridge nearing depletion based on usage patterns, GIDR.ai can send a proactive message: "We've noticed your printer's black toner is low and may run out in three days. Would you like guided steps to replace it or make an automated order?" This empowers clients to resolve minor issues independently, reducing truck rolls and operational costs. Our SOP emphasizes a decision-making framework that prioritizes outreach based on severity and self-resolution likelihood, minimizing alert fatigue. We have also built in seamless escalations to human support, ensuring context from the AI chat is transferred fully.

This initiative builds on our ongoing software evolution. Just as the 2014 switch to e-automate modernized our back end, we are now considering a conversion to DXone integrated with Acumatica. This cloud-based ERP could enhance our AI capabilities, providing real-time analytics and better API integrations with tools like NinjaOne. The transition, which may take place, would allow us to scale GIDR.ai across our entire fleet, managing everything from printers to firewalls with unprecedented efficiency.

Hits and misses aside, AI's potential excites me because it aligns with my commitment to community leadership. By optimizing our operations, we can invest more in local initiatives — sponsoring STEM programs for youth or providing discounted tech to nonprofits. Imagine dealers using AI not just for profit, but to support underserved businesses, ensuring equitable access to reliable office technology.

My AI Journey So Far

My AI journey so far has been one of learning, adaptation and optimism. From chatbot flops to prospecting triumphs, and from e-automate's foundational shift to GIDR.ai's proactive future, AI has proven its worth. For the office technology dealer channel, it is a catalyst for innovation, efficiency and customer-centric growth. As we navigate this path, let's collaborate through associations like the Business Technology Association (BTA) to share best practices and ethical guidelines. After all, technology's true power lies in how it serves people — and in our industry, that is the ultimate measure of success. ∎

Jeffrey Foley is the co-founder and COO of Apollo Office Systems, a role he has held since 2005. Apollo is a family-owned and operated dealership and managed service provider based in Alvin, Texas. The company provides technology solutions, products and services, implementing innovative infrastructure systems to enhance operations and customer relationships. Previously, Foley managed multimillion-dollar capital projects at Verizon, negotiated high-profile contracts with organizations such as NASA and the FBI, and significantly expanded market share in the health-care, federal and education sectors. Foley can be reached at jfoley@apolloofficesystems.com. Visit www.apolloofficesystems.com.

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