

One of the “Most Engaging Skills on Alexa” is an Episcopal Prayer Service

The experiment: merge centuries-old tradition with innovative technology by making a prayer partner out of Amazon’s virtual assistant, Alexa. The initial attempt was successful and the idea continues to evolve. What did the experiment hope to achieve? How did it work? What might it lead to? Here’s what happened.

TryTank: An Experimental Laboratory

TryTank: An Experimental Laboratory for Church Growth and Innovation is a joint project of the [Virginia Theological Seminary](#) and the [General Theological Seminary](#).

The Episcopal think tank is the brainchild of the Very Rev. Ian Marham, Dean and President of VTS, the Very Rev. Kurt Dunkle, Dean and President of GTS, and the Rev. Lorenzo Lebrija, then a priest in the diocese of Los Angeles. They created TryTank to better understand the forces threatening the church and to test different ideas, technologies, and innovations in order to overcome those forces.

Father Lorenzo, when asked about the motivation for creating TryTank, commented: “This was, for us, a tangible opportunity to go where the Spirit was leading us and see what there might be for us; of finding new ways of being in church that we don’t even know about yet.”

TryTank works to equip future leaders to reinvigorate and adapt the church to our changing world. The group’s current 34 experiments range from a [Facebook Master Class](#), which teaches Facebook marketing strategies to gain church followers, to [Spin Church](#), an activity combining spin cycle classes and Mass.

Not every experiment succeeds, but that is part of the buy-in. Continuous trial and error is required to find technologies and methods that will expand church participation.

TryTank plans to find ministry homes to continue successful experiments. By harnessing the power of technology to innovate how we interact with religion and prayer, the future of the church might be brighter than ever.

Alexa Skill

The Alexa Prayer Skill was TryTank's first experiment to bridge technology with religion. It was an attempt to offer a simple and accessible prayer option that Episcopalians and other Amazon Echo users could fit into their busy lives.

"Having options is wonderful. This is a very convenient option to have for one's prayer life," said Bob Coghill, of the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Juno, Alaska. Coghill is one of hundreds of the Amazon Skill users.

The concept of the project was to program Alexa, the virtual assistant on the Amazon Echo, to play a slimmed down version of the Daily Office to Episcopalians far and wide.

The prayer would be delivered right to their 21st century speaker by a "skill," as apps on the Amazon Echo are called, produced by the software development company Azumo.

"I was going through Amazon looking for a prayer skill and saw it. I typically use the Episcopal Prayer Skill 4 times a week," commented Bob Coghill.

To initiate the skill, the user either asks Alexa to "open the Episcopal Prayer" Alexa responds, "The Lord be with you," and then plays a recording of the day's morning prayer from the Daily Office. The prayer consists of a collect, Canticle or Psalm, Lesson, a concluding collect of the day, and the Ending.

The objective of the experiment was to get technologically-savvy Episcopalians to pray at home or in their vehicles.

The ultimate goal was to increase church attendance. According to Father Lorenzo, studies have shown that the more people engage with scripture, the higher likelihood they have of attending church services.

They would also gain further benefits. The [Research](#) mentioned by Fr. Lorenzo, conducted by [Back to the Bible](#), a worldwide Christian ministry dedicated to spiritual leadership, has found that people who engage with scripture 4 or more times per week are more likely to embrace their faith and attend services, and less likely to engage in risky behavior.

"I feel that the Alexa Skill has connected me with the wider church," continued Bob Coghill. "I like the skill as it is and I wouldn't change it."

Developing the Skill

The project began on January 21st, 2019, with an anticipated launch date of mid-February.

Developing the Amazon Skill took more time than Father Lorenzo predicted. Software development can be complicated and relatively slow, especially considering Amazon's strict guidelines regarding skills. Both the launch and marketing campaign were delayed by 2 months.

The Rev. Ben G. Robertson IV, Rector of The Chapel of the Cross in Madison, Mississippi, was chosen to be the voice of the prayer skill. Father Ben is a self-proclaimed technology geek whose father proudly owned one of the first Macintosh computers. Father Ben's technological acumen made him a perfect fit for TryTank.

"I met Lorenzo at a conference in Boston last February and he was talking about the different experiments he was doing with TryTank and I thought it was all very interesting," says Father Ben, "so afterwards I approached him and offered my assistance. Eventually we connected and he asked me to give him assistance with the Alexa Skill."

Father Ben developed the text of the liturgy and began a back-and-forth communication with Father Lorenzo, discussing how an Episcopal prayer service could best be compacted into a 4-minute-or-less audio recording.

"One of the big challenges for me was that we had the time limit and I wanted to develop something that was true to the Daily Office, but also something that would be accessible to someone who had just stumbled upon the skill, all while fitting under 4 minutes."

Marketing the Project

After news of the skill's completion reached TryTank in April, the Christian group announced the upcoming arrival of the Alexa Skill in their online newsletter.

Father Lorenzo also planned a social media marketing campaign that took place on Facebook and Instagram from April 8th until May 8th. The strategy of the social media campaign sought to advertise the skill to the following three demographics:

The First Party demographic was comprised of content engagers and page fans of TryTank's Facebook and Instagram pages. These visitors were redirected to the Alexa Skill landing page where they learned about the experiment and were henceforth shown ads for the skill.

The Lookalike demographic was composed of social media users with similar interests, page likes, and activity to the First Party demographic. These users were neither content engagers nor page fans of TryTank's social media pages, but their "lookalike" interests made them prospective users of the Alexa Skill.

Lastly, the Affinity demographic consisted of social media users who were fans of Episcopal Churches, Diocese, and Seminaries, and fans of the Book of Common Prayer.

The marketing campaign was a success, reaching 80,927 people across Facebook and Instagram in a month. 1,213 of the unique users targeted by the campaign viewed the [Alexa Skill page on Amazon](#).

Almost everybody reached by the marketing campaign was Episcopalian. The largest demographic reached by the campaign was women 65 and older.

The older demographic was not the audience that Father Lorenzo initially envisioned using the new technology, but this speaks to the nature of the church. Older people are far more engaged with scripture than younger generations -- a reality that Father Lorenzo is working to change.

Alexa Skill Launch

The Alexa Skill was launched on April 24th, 2019. The skill quickly gained traction as hundreds of unique users, and then over a thousand, activated the skill on their Amazon Echo.

The majority of users activated the skill after learning about it through TryTank's Facebook marketing campaign. Some found the skill by scrolling through Amazon's skill database. Others began using the Amazon Skill after reading TryTank's newsletter announcing its launch.

Besides a few glitches that disabled the skill, everything seemed to be going well.

Between July and August, TryTank sent out an anonymous survey asking for users' impressions of the skill.

Some comments were:

“I find that my day starts off better by listening to the Episcopal prayers & readings. Also, I love telling people about this app so we can all join in. The more that pray, the better.”

“I really enjoyed using the skill in the morning. I think it will be helpful for others wanting to pray but who feel like hearing the readings from another person.”

Certain concerns were also raised.

“I love having the readings available - I can add the opening of Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer myself. But, I’ve only heard male leaders in the few times I’ve used it. Are leaders rotated? Please include female voices if you haven’t already.”

Accommodating every user’s preferences is an ongoing process, but TryTank understands that hiccups and challenges are part of the work. While specific shortcomings cannot always be foreseen, TryTank will aim to fix them in the future.

In any case, the anonymous survey feedback was overwhelmingly positive -- users loved the skill.

What Went Right?

The intention of the experiment was to make Daily Prayer easy and accessible. And, according to Father Lorenzo, it worked.

“It wasn’t that there were hundreds of thousands of users of the skill, it was that a small but dedicated group of people were repeatedly using this prayer computer. Over 1,000 people have activated the skill and about 200 people pray with Alexa multiple times a week.”

TryTank measured whether people would engage Alexa at all, and then if they would do it again. To Father Lorenzo’s delight, they did.

Father Lorenzo accepts that, considering the nature of the skill, the audience would never be massive. “We’re not National Public Radio or a television network. We’re a very small organization with a select audience, but we have dedicated users who keep coming back to pray with the skill, and that’s why I think this experiment worked,” conceded Father Lorenzo.

On September 11, 2019, TryTank received a memo from Amazon saying that the Episcopal Prayer skill was one of the “most engaging skills on Alexa.”

“I thought it was fake, that it was some phishing attempt,” remarked Father Lorenzo, regarding the joyful and unexpected news. “I was careful not to click on the hyperlinks in the email, thinking that somebody was trying to steal my information. I immediately opened up a new window and went to the Amazon website and, to my surprise, it was true.”

The statistics showed that 207 unique people prayed with the skill 1,053 times in a 30 day time period. These statistics confirmed the objective of the experiment and supported the conclusion that Alexa Skill listeners would more likely attend church.

Was Father Lorenzo prepared for such a response? Well, not so much: “It’s not like being an actor and knowing that your work might win an Academy Award. I had no idea that we could be one of the most engaging skills on Alexa, much less receive a small check for it!”

To Father Lorenzo, the church is an ever-changing institution. Although the liturgy has remained the same for centuries, the ways in which Episcopalians interact with the church has not. Father Lorenzo seeks to help design the future architecture of the church.

In a sense, TryTank is experimenting with the unknown, at least to Father Lorenzo: “Will the church look and feel different in the future? I think so. I hope so. I am certain that we will be floored by all the things that we don’t even know yet, but that God has already planned for us.”

What Could Be Learned from the Experiment?

Father Lorenzo considers Phase One of the Alexa Skill experiment a success, but that does not mean that everything worked as expected.

“Even from successful experiments, we could learn how we might have done things differently and made the experiment stronger,” acknowledged Father Lorenzo. “I think we could have done a better job to market the Alexa Skill to a younger audience and to people who are not currently praying every day.”

Part of the issue might have been the Facebook marketing campaign.

“The ads were very specific and said, ‘Pray the Daily Office with Alexa.’ I think that, by the very nature of being millennials, who tend to not be so religious, young audiences were far less likely to click on the ad because they were not familiar with the Daily Office.”

The older demographic was not TryTank’s intended audience at the experiment’s inception, but that made the success of the experiment more clear in certain ways.

“On the one hand, I think it’s true that we picked the low hanging fruit with this experiment,” admits Father Lorenzo. “On the other hand, though, we might have never known that the Alexa Skill could supplement peoples’ prayer schedules had we only marketed the skill to people who don’t normally pray.”

This brings us to Phase Two.

Alexa Skill Phase Two

The next step is to introduce the Alexa Skill to a wider audience. This includes the younger demographic, some of whom have never been to church and others who place a greater emphasis on spirituality than organized religion.

It’s challenging work, but Father Lorenzo feels up to the task. Accommodating people unfamiliar or out of touch with scripture is written into the mission of TryTank. Church attendance is dropping and TryTank seeks to reverse that trend.

There is also another group that Phase Two will target: “The next iteration of the Alexa Skill will have a Spanish speaking option,” said Father Lorenzo.

Inclusion of Spanish speakers, the quickest growing language group in the United States, will almost certainly be beneficial.

When can we expect Phase Two of the Amazon Skill? According to Father Lorenzo, “as soon as we can make it happen.”