

A Guide to Creating a Vendor Beauty Parade

Although this document focuses on Conversational AI, the concepts are generally domain-agnostic.

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Executive Summary

In the rapidly evolving landscape of Conversational AI, selecting the right vendor for your organisation can be a daunting task. This comprehensive guide introduces and explores the concept of a "Vendor Beauty Parade" as an essential strategy in your AI adoption journey.

What is a Vendor Beauty Parade?

A beauty parade is a structured process where multiple Conversational AI vendors showcase their solutions to your team. Unlike a formal Request for Proposal (RFP), a beauty parade is an exploratory stage designed to inform and inspire your AI strategy.

Key Benefits:

1. Discover the art of the possible in Conversational AI
2. Compare diverse vendor offerings side-by-side
3. Gain insights from both established players and innovative startups
4. Understand implementation strategies and potential challenges
5. Align your team's vision for AI adoption

Why You Need This Guide:

- Avoid the pitfalls of premature RFPs
- Learn how to structure and manage effective vendor presentations
- Understand how to overcome common challenges in the selection process
- Get practical tips on involving key stakeholders and decision-makers

Who Should Read This:

- C-level executives considering AI adoption
- IT leaders tasked with implementing Conversational AI
- Business analysts involved in vendor selection
- Anyone interested in the strategic approach to AI integration

This guide provides a step-by-step approach to planning, executing, and following up on a Conversational AI beauty parade. By following these best practices, you'll be well-equipped to make informed decisions about your organisation's AI future.

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Introduction

In the rapidly evolving world of artificial intelligence, finding and selecting the right Conversational AI vendor for your business can be a difficult task. One effective strategy in this journey is to arrange a Vendor Beauty Parade.

"A beauty parade is an essential stage in any organisation's discovery process for Conversational AI."

This guide will walk you through the process of arranging and conducting a successful beauty parade, helping you make informed decisions about your AI investments.

What is a 'Beauty Parade' in Conversational AI?

A 'beauty parade' in business terminology refers to a process where multiple vendors are invited to present their offerings to help inspire and educate. In the context of Conversational AI, it involves inviting several AI vendors to demonstrate their chatbots, virtual assistants, or other conversational AI solutions to your team.

Key Points:

- Not to be mistaken for an RFP (Request for Proposal)
- Occurs before you know exactly what you want to achieve
- An essential stage in the discovery process

Discovering What's Possible

If you're thinking about making a move into the Conversational AI space – or, you're already running older generation 'decision tree' chatbots – and you'd like to get an idea of what's possible in today's world, I strongly recommend arranging a **Vendor Beauty Parade**.

I do these quite often for clients and I think they're a simply fantastic activity if:

- You haven't defined your strategy yet
- You're looking for inspiration on what's possible
- You're open to exploring different ways of doing things
- You'd like to understand how other companies are using Conversational AI
- You'd like to get an idea of the costs and return-on-investment possibilities
- You want to expose your senior executives to the marketplace

A 'beauty parade' is a process where multiple vendors are invited to present their offerings. In the context of Conversational AI, it involves inviting several AI vendors to demonstrate their chatbots, virtual assistants, or other conversational AI solutions to your team.

This is not to be mistaken for an RFP. That comes later, ideally *when you know* what you want to achieve.

An Essential Stage in The Discovery Process

A beauty parade is an indispensable part of any organisation's journey into Conversational AI. Too often, the process unfolds like this:

1. A senior executive declares, "We need to do something with chatbots!" Or perhaps they've just discovered a competitor's new AI capabilities.
2. The task lands on the desk of a business analyst, buried deep in the company's hierarchy. Their mission? Craft an RFP ("Request for Proposal") with the procurement team.
3. If you're on the vendor side, you'll recognize the ensuing chaos. You're faced with an "*RFP-but-we-don't-know-what-we-want*" situation. It's a nightmare scenario that plays out all too frequently.
4. For those on the client side, you've likely experienced that moment of realization mid-RFP when you discover your objectives are as clear as mud.
5. The business analyst diligently conducts "desktop research." It's supposed to be comprehensive, and the executive believes it is. In reality, it often consists of three 20-minute Google sessions, bolstered by some quick prompts to Microsoft Copilot or ChatGPT.
6. The result? A basic RFP template that satisfies the procurement team but falls woefully short of capturing the organisation's true needs and the market's capabilities.

This approach is backwards. It's painful for everyone involved, including vendors who must respond to these vague RFPs with dozens of clarifying questions. That's why I always emphasize the importance of the discovery stage when working with clients.

A beauty parade allows you to:

- Discover what's possible in the world of Conversational AI
- See what solutions are out there
- Understand how other companies are benefiting from this technology
- Consider where and how you want to apply AI in your organisation

Moreover, it prompts you to ask crucial questions:

- Are your internal and external APIs ready for AI integration?
- What about your data stores?
- Have you considered the human, cultural, and technological implications?
- How will AI affect your end-to-end business process flows?

By addressing these points early through a beauty parade, you set the stage for a more informed, effective RFP process down the line.

Don't Do Your Learning and Discovery During RFP

The Pitfalls of Learning During RFP

Initiating an RFP before understanding your needs is putting the cart before the horse. It's not just wrong; it's painfully wrong – for everyone involved. Vendors end up bombarding you with clarifying questions, and you're left sorting through a maze of information you're not prepared to navigate.

This is precisely why I emphasize the *discovery stage* when working with clients. Here's what you should be doing before even thinking about an RFP:

- Discover what's possible in the world of Conversational AI
- Survey the landscape of available solutions
- Understand how other companies are benefiting from this technology
- Carefully consider where and how you want to apply AI in your organisation

Ask yourself these critical questions:

- Are your internal and external APIs ready for AI integration?
- What about your data stores?
- Have you considered the human, cultural, and technological implications?
- How will AI affect your end-to-end business process flows?

Overcoming Executive Resistance

When I suggest a beauty parade, I often face immediate pushback from executives. The knee-jerk response is usually, "*We're not ready to meet vendors.*" Digging deeper, I find it's often rooted in a fear of being inundated with overzealous salespeople, constant follow-ups, and the dreaded automated catch-up messages every other day.

I get it. No one wants to suddenly become a key prospect on multiple vendor Salesforce charts. Having been a bank executive myself, I've been on the receiving end of this vendor onslaught. It's not pleasant.

Reframing The Conversation

But here's the thing – you are ready to explore, aren't you? When I pose it this way, 9 times out of 10, executives agree. They readily agree with the phrase, "*We are ready to explore possibilities.*"

And that's exactly what a beauty parade allows you to do. Here's how:

- Run a strictly managed beauty parade of top Conversational AI vendors
- Bring them 'in' – usually virtually, sometimes physically
- Listen to what they have to say, on your terms

By controlling the process, you get the benefits of exploration without the drawbacks of unsolicited sales pitches. It's a win-win: you gain invaluable insights (and potentially useful relationships) and vendors get a fair chance to showcase their solutions.

Remember, a well-executed beauty parade is about discovery, not commitment. It's your opportunity to learn, compare, and strategize – all before you invest significant time and resources into an RFP process.

The Benefits of Arranging a Beauty Parade

Here are the benefits of this approach:

Discover What You Don't Know

Keep an open mind to explore what others are doing and what best practices are mentioned. Sometimes a single phrase from a vendor can completely change or challenge your intentions or underlying strategy. This is good. We want this now, not halfway through the RFP process.

Compare & Contrast

A beauty parade allows you to compare different vendor offerings side by side, making it easier to evaluate strengths, weaknesses and suitability for your ideas. You'll be surprised how much you can learn from a simple beauty parade meeting with a few vendors.

Engage With Startups

Often you might never consider working with a startup or a newer vendor, simply because they generally wouldn't pass your demanding procurement processes. You don't have that limitation when you're running the beauty parade. So embrace an open mind and consider also meeting with some of the smaller, nimbler startups in the industry. They can give you a completely different set of perspectives on what's possible. *Ultimately, if you did want to work with them, there's always a way of sorting out the procurement challenges (e.g. Source them via Accenture or whoever your big technology partner is).*

Engage With 'Adjacent' Vendors

Like the above point, you can meet with vendors who work in adjacent spaces or might not have direct experience in your industry. This needn't be a limitation when you're doing research. You might end up learning some fascinating and instructive insights – and you might even end up working with the vendor to help build out one element of your offering.

Hands-on Experience

You will often get to interact with the vendor's solutions in demo form, providing a better understanding of user experience and capabilities than you would get from marketing materials alone. Most vendors will have a demonstration they can show, or even better, they'll show one of their publicly available client implementations.

Customisation Insights

During presentations, you can ask vendors how they would tailor their solutions to your specific needs, giving you a clearer picture of their flexibility and customisation capabilities. This is often a useful opportunity to identify aspects that just won't work for you – or that might need you to adjust your plans.

Team Involvement

The process allows key stakeholders from various departments to participate, ensuring that different perspectives and requirements are considered. I always recommend getting the decision maker(s) involved at this stage wherever possible. Or at the very least, get the #2 to the executive, or the prime executive influencer in every meeting, if the executive can't be there themselves.

Business Model Discussion

You can use this opportunity to discuss high-level business model preferences. It's far better to have these conversations early rather than at the RFP stage. Most vendors will be happy to give a guideline on approximate budgets and rough usage costs. At this stage, vendors are acutely conscious of ensuring they are invited to any future RFPs - so they'll often give highly useful hints on how things could be structured.

Technical Compatibility

You can assess how well each solution would integrate with your existing systems and infrastructure. I'd suggest this can be absolutely critical. Understanding how each vendor has implemented their technology can be helpful for your tech advisers or architects to begin thinking about the kind of effort needed to support internally.

Cultural Fit

Face-to-face interactions, even if virtual, can help you gauge how well each vendor's team would work with yours. Sometimes physical is difficult – but if you're a large player, it's likely most vendors will fly out to meet you, even just for a beauty parade.

How to Conduct an Effective Beauty Parade

Here are my preferred steps for conducting a valuable vendor beauty parade:

Set Clear Internal Objectives

- Define what you want to achieve with Conversational AI before inviting vendors. I've put some suggestions below.

Be Clear with Vendors

- Set the expectations of the vendors from the start. Be clear that you're in 'research mode'. I always underline that '*the client is not buying yet, they are researching*'. Sometimes they can get carried away.
- Rarely will vendors refuse to engage in beauty parades – however if they understand you're not buying 'yet', some might prefer to meet remotely rather than physically.

Diverse Selection

- Invite a mix of established players and innovative startups to get a broad perspective on available solutions.

Real-World Scenarios

- Prepare use cases or scenarios specific to your business for vendors to demonstrate.

Q&A Sessions

- Allow time for in-depth questions from your team to each vendor.

Post-presentation Discussions

- After each presentation, have internal discussions to gather immediate impressions and capture insights.

Potential Challenges and How to Overcome Them

I often see the following challenges with vendor beauty parades – here's how I recommend addressing them:

Time Consumption

- Beauty parades can be time intensive. Short meetings can easily stray beyond the allocated timeslot if you don't manage things effectively.
- You can easily address this by scheduling efficiently and involving only key decision-makers. See my 'methodology' section below for more details.

Information Overload

- To avoid confusion from too much information, keep your objectives in mind and make sure you assign someone to make some thorough notes.
- You might also ask vendors if they will send copies of their presentations. (Some will agree, some will prefer not to.)

Vendor Fatigue

- When you're meeting multiple vendors in a short period, 'vendor fatigue' can set in.
- Full-day marathon beauty parades might sound like a good idea from a calendar management standpoint, but very quickly, things can become very hazy, very quickly.
- One way to maintain engagement is by spacing out presentations – across a week, for example, and by keeping sessions interactive.

Bias Towards Flashy Presentations

- It's very easy to be swayed by fancy or flashy presentations, especially when you're sitting in a full day of 8 different vendor presentations.
- Space things out so that you aren't reliant on bucketloads of caffeine to keep everyone focused.

Executive Attention

- Avoid your executives (and other participants) getting bored during vendor presentations by creating meetings that are short, interactive and to the point.

Example Beauty Parade Internal Objectives

Your internal objectives for a beauty parade might look something like this:

- Understand the offerings and capabilities of the market-leading vendors
- Meet a variety of different vendors and establish basic relationships with them
- Get a broad understanding of how vendors recommend implementing their services, sample timescales and likely internal resource demands
- Understand the potential business models for adopting Conversational AI
- Understand how other customers (possibly competitors) have implemented Conversational AI in their business (vendors will usually offer example case studies to support this)
- Obtain inspiration to help formulate your organisation's Conversational AI strategy
- Identify some example metrics to inform upcoming business case discussions (e.g. many vendors will often be able to give you at least a rough idea of volumes and the resulting commercial impacts)

Example Beauty Parade Methodology

There's no wrong answer to arranging a Vendor Beauty Parade but here are some aspects that I recommend. Let's assume that you're aiming for 6 vendor meetings, comprising 4 industry players and 2 startups.

Get Executive Buy-in

- Make sure your senior executives are 'bought in' on the beauty parade concept and that they will directly support it (or they'll make sure their #2 colleague will be there.)

Internal Team Alignment

- Sometimes it's useful to invite colleagues from various departments to participate in the beauty parade.
- So, for example, members from the customer experience team, the risk team, the information security team, and the API team.
- This is useful for assembling the broad coalition that you'll need in future.
- Generally speaking, most colleagues are usually happy to support, especially if they're getting advanced notice of a key upcoming programme of work.

Identify The Vendors

- If you need help finding or identifying example vendors, talk to an expert or perform a comprehensive search - the usual suspects such as Gartner will have some kind of listing, but a lot of compelling service providers aren't on those lists. *Don't rely on a Google search.*

Reach Out To Vendors

- Talk to the vendors and explain what you're aiming to achieve with the beauty parade.
- Be exceptionally clear about your objectives and explain that you are aiming to learn, not buy.
- Every vendor senior executive will usually be *delighted to participate*.

Insist On Senior Vendor Participants

- Insist on senior-level participants from the vendor – the beauty parade is not something that should be run by the vendor's Sales Development Representative or junior sales team.
- Most vendors will understand this but some might need a prod in the right direction.

Send The Agenda

- Send the meeting agenda to the vendor and check they agree with the plans.
- Do ask them if there's anything they would like to amend - sometimes you can get excellent additions that you missed.

Book The Beauty Parade Meetings

- My suggestion is a maximum of 2 vendor meetings in a day.
- If you've got the luxury of spreading things out, then I'd go for one vendor meeting per day, across 5 days, for example.
- Or you could spread it across 2 weeks.
- Avoid vendor fatigue and offer your colleagues time to reflect on what they've seen and heard.

Appoint A Note-Taker

- Ask someone in your team to actively take notes on what they're hearing during the meeting.
- AI transcription can be useful, but I would strongly recommend 'human notes' in this context – so that you've got something to refer back to for the upcoming strategy discussions.
- Distribute these notes to all internal participants after the meeting.

Brief Each Vendor

- I think it's useful to meet with the vendor ahead of time to give an overview.
- This is very helpful to make sure the vendors are fully briefed.
- Sometimes things get lost in translation and the vendor's Chief Revenue Officer turns up thinking they're in the middle of an RFP meeting.

- Meet ahead of time with the vendors to brief them on who's going to be at the meeting and explain why you're running the beauty parade.
- This can help the vendor tailor their messaging so that you get the best outcomes.

Strictly Manage Each Meeting

- Appoint someone to strictly manage each vendor meeting. It's often ideal if this person is a third party – like me – who can be a little more direct than you.
- Everyone wants to be polite, but you do need someone keeping an eye on the time and who is keeping things moving.
- Manage each agenda point from the start so that everyone, including your internal executives, stays focused.

Debrief The Vendors

- After each meeting, I think it's helpful to hold a quick debrief with the vendor a few days later.
- You might think this is unnecessary, but I think it helps connect the dots for everyone.
- Vendors are often left wondering 'what happened' and 'what is the next step'.
- Since they've given up their time to participate, I think it's only right that you should do this.

A debrief meeting gives you the opportunity to:

- Clarify any points that were of interest
- Ask for follow-up information, case studies or metrics
- Ask the vendor for their feedback – this is a key question, because sometimes the vendor might have been reflecting on points that your team had raised, or perhaps the vendor will invite you to meet or talk to their customers to get more information on a particular point
- Clearly set the expectations for next steps (e.g. "thank you so much, we're going to spend some time assessing and we'll keep you updated in due course")

Beauty Parade Review Meeting

- Once you've finished the beauty parade, make sure you've sent the notes to all internal participants.
- Then convene a meeting to review the learnings from the beauty parade.

Sample Meeting Agenda

I'd suggest a sample beauty parade meeting should last around 45 minutes. Book an hour in everyone's calendar, but if you can, keep things to time. If there's a lot of discussion, you have a few minutes of padding.

Your organisation introduction

- *5 minutes*. Carefully manage this. Sometimes your executive can get carried away with a 15 minute introduction that blows the agenda.

Introduce the meeting purpose

- *5 minutes*. You've already briefed the vendor, but it's useful for them to hear it from your stakeholders in real time. Briefly explain why you're having the meeting – e.g. We're evaluating what we should be doing in the field of Conversational AI and we want to understand your capabilities.

Vendor introduction

- *5 minutes*. Give the vendor time to present their company overview, introduce their team and highlight some key clients or projects relevant to your organisation.

Vendor Presentation

- *20 minutes*. Give the vendor the stage to show off what they're doing. It might be a product tour or a series of case studies. This is something you've already discussed in your pre-briefing meeting so it shouldn't be a surprise.

Questions & Answers

- *10 minutes*. Allow time for questions and discussion. Remember you've likely got a debrief meeting already scheduled so you can point to this as a follow-up time if there are any requests from your team.

Thank you & close

- Thank the vendor for their time and highlight the debrief meeting as the next step (if you've opted to do those).

Next Steps After The Beauty Parade

Once you've held the beauty parade, everyone's brains should be whizzing with ideas and possibilities. Hopefully, the meetings will have inspired your colleagues. Everyone will have been thinking about the topic, so whilst it's fresh in minds, bring the key stakeholders back together.

The Beauty Parade Review Meeting

This is an essential stage to review the feedback from the beauty parade. It's here that you can start to tease our ideas and visions for your organisation.

I suggest running an open-ended meeting to ask questions such as:

- What did you learn?
- What surprised you?
- What was a key takeaway from each vendor's presentation?
- How have your views on Conversational AI changed?
- Do we have any further questions or is there any more information we want from the vendors?
- What are the next steps?

You'll likely get a steer from your senior executives in this meeting on what they'd like to happen next. Or, it may well need a follow-up meeting to decide on the approach. Often it might be authorisation to commence a proof-of-concept, or something a lot more focused. Either way, you've now got a small community of relationships with key vendors to use – and you have increased your stakeholders' awareness and experience of what's possible with Conversational AI.

Good luck!

Do you need any help?

If you need any help, please think of me. I work regularly with companies offering consultancy and advisory services in the Conversational AI space. I do this through my other company, [New Era Digital Partners](#). I can help at all stages of the process, including managing the beauty parade process for you. Please send me a note and I'd be delighted to discuss.

My email is ewan@ned.partners and my phone number is +44 7769 658 104.

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