Chat with Abhilash Murthy's Bus Uncle to find out arrival timings and more

Uncle, what time is the bus coming ah?

AMRITA KAUR

IN SEPTEMBER last year, he was waiting for a bus in Orchard when he looked at the electronic board behind him showing buses and their arrival times.

Mr Abhilash Murthy felt it provided too much information when all he wanted to know was the arrival time of bus service 65.

He also had to wait for the screen to refresh and display the next page before he could note the arrival time.

He then tried to use his smartphone to look for bus arrival timing apps but found the information on the apps cluttered and not personalised.

"I had to input my location, the bus stop I was at on the map, scroll through a long list of bus services before finding the arrival time of bus service 65. I was looking at a lot of unnecessary information in the process," he said.

In April last year, Facebook had released a Messenger platform for bots, and Mr Murthy had been meaning to use it to build a chatbot. It dawned on him then that building one that could tell specific bus arrival timings was the perfect reason to start working on a chatbot prototype.

The 25-year-old Singapore permanent resident from Bengaluru worked on a functional basic prototype and drew bus arrival timing data from the Land Transport Authority (LTA).

Said Mr Murthy on how it works: "The chatbot connects to the data online so whenever a user asks a question, it tries to understand where the user is and which bus he or she is waiting for. And once the chatbot sends this data to LTA and gets the answer, it sends it to the user in a friendly format."

To start using it, users have to log onto Facebook, like the Bus Uncle page and start messaging it to ask for bus arrival timings.

The chatbot, which Mr Murthy named Bus Uncle, finds the area the user is in and searches for all nearby bus stops.
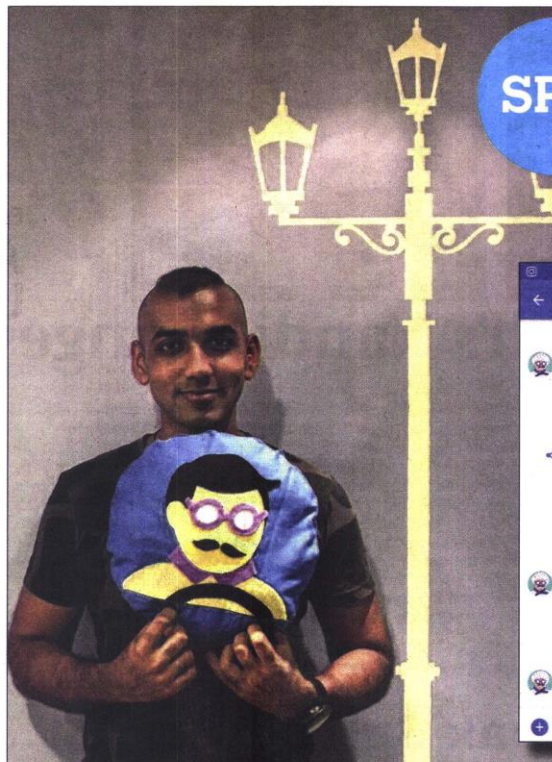
Users can also send their location map or say "I'm at Orchard" and Bus Uncle will identify the nearest bus stop to him.

Commuters can even ask it if there are seats in the bus too.

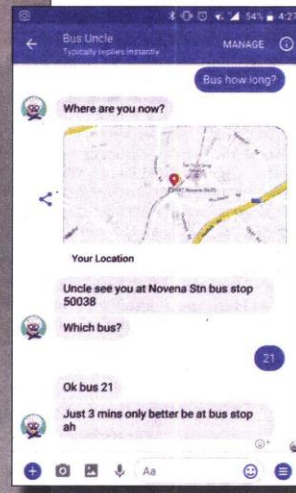While the founder was building the chatbot, he was motivated to introduce a personality to it.

And as a frequent traveller on buses, Mr Murthy was inspired to give it a similar avatar and voice to bus drivers he had met during these journeys so that users of Bus Uncle can relate to a familiar personality — also the reason why he named the chatbot Bus Uncle.

"Sometimes they are friendly and sometimes they are kiasu and grumpy, and they'll get up and shout, 'Move to the back, move to the back', when the bus is crowded," said Mr Murthy who came to Singapore in 2010 to do his degree in information systems management at Singapore Management University.

As his Singlish was not good, he got the help of his Singaporean girlfriend and used natural language processing to code the Singlish words and phrases, making Bus Uncle sound like a real person.

Mr Murthy shared screenshots of conversations with Bus Uncle on his Facebook page last year, and immediately got his friends interested.

"My friends shared it, and their friends also shared it, and it went viral quickly,"

What was intended as a side project to ease the woe of checking specific bus arrival timings was then picked up by an online media company and it posted an article about Bus Uncle.

In four hours, the number of users went from 200 to 8,000 and the chatbot crashed as it was not intended to handle that kind of traffic, said Mr Murthy.

Encouraged by the response, he incorporated Bus Uncle in July and left his job as a software engineer at TradeGecko in September to work on the start-up full time.

Today, there are 40,000 people using the chatbot, and it receives 30,000 to 50,000 messages a day.

Leveraging on Bus Uncle's followers and traffic, the start-up helps brands and organisations by raising awareness of their products and services through Bus Uncle's voice.

In February this year, Mr Murthy was approached by an advertising agency working with BBC Worldwide to advertise the BBC iPlayer — an internet streaming, catch-up, television and radio service.

"The agency sent me a message saying, 'Bus Uncle gets a lot of traffic from people who take buses and at the same time BBC Worldwide had placed advertisements some of these buses. Could you shoutout to the commuters who board these particular buses and tell them about the product through Bus Uncle's messages to the users?'

"So whenever users asked for the arrival time of a bus that had the BBC iPlayer advertisement on it, Bus Uncle will reply to the user something like, 'Hey, by the way, you should check out BBC iPlayer, it is something I watch.'"

This made Mr Murthy realise that there was a new market and that people have not used a chatbot to advertise their business.

"But because Bus Uncle is getting a lot of traffic, there is an opportunity for this, he said.

The start-up, which hires part-timers to handle design and paid marketing, has also worked with MasterCard for its cashless campaign, where it pushed out "small, interesting stories" on the Bus Uncle Facebook page about using credit cards instead of cash.

Mr Murthy is replicating the Bus Uncle model and working on more chatbots in the food and movie space to provide a similar value.

Said Mr Murthy: "Chatbots and artificial intelligence are new, and people don't understand them well, which makes their value hard to communicate with clients. The challenge is to get people onboard and tell them this technology will be prevalent in the near future."

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When is the bus coming?... (Above) Mr Abhilash Murthy with the Bus Uncle cushion and a screenshot of a conversation with Bus Uncle. PHOTOS: ABHILASH MURTHY