

IBM India CTO pitches grocery shopping by recipes, virtual mirrors and green stores - what AI can do in the post-COVID world

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Grocery shopping will be more need-driven, virtual mirrors are going to be mainstream, and masks won't hide your face. IBM India and South Asia's Chief Technology Officer (CTO), Subram Natarajan forecasts that more artificial intelligence (AI) use cases are going to come out from the woodwork into the mainstream and the world settles into the 'new normal' of the post-COVID world.

One such example is of retail shops turning into green stores using AI, where the light and air-conditioning usage operates automatically depending on footfall density. "It may not be a very 'sexy' solution, but at the end of the day, it puts money in the pocket," he said during an interview with Business Insider.

Other solutions include banking, telecom, distribution with AI coming into the picture without it being obvious. However, here are some use cases that will be out in plain sight as they completely revamp how you go about your daily life.

Virtual mirrors for finding the perfect outfit

When you normally go to a store, you try on a shirt, you see if its fit, you check in the mirror and then you decide whether or not you want to buy it. However, people may be wary of putting on clothes that others have tried in an era where everything has to be contactless.

"The experience of shopping, the experience of what you used to do while shopping, in a retail outlet — is now going to be enhanced using AI in the virtual world," Natarajan told Business Insider.

One of those changes may be virtual mirrors. *"It's essentially when you can stand in front of a mirror pretending that you're wearing that particular attire that you chose. It allows you to see what you would look like wearing those clothes without actually being in the shop,"* he explained.



Shopping for ingredients by recipe



Even grocery shopping may see a revamp with brick-and-mortar stores seeing less footfall and being open for shorter amounts of time. In a normal grocery outlet, you shop as you walk down the aisles, spotting what you need — and what you remember. With AI, the app will do the remembering for you, and maybe even offer substitutes.

"For example, I'm in the mood for pizza, what do I do? So, I can actually go to a grocer and ask them that if I'm the mood for pizza — what are the ingredients that I need? The AI will become a part of that entire decision-making process," said Natarajan.

He explains that "the whole aspect of adjacency will come into play". Instead of thinking about what you may need, the app or grocer will suggest what you can buy and what other ingredients you can try.

"Something we tend to forget ingredients. The AI will help remind you. If you're grocery shopping, physically, you tend to forget because it's not there in front of you. You'll have to go looking for that ingredient in some aisle, on some shelf. In a virtual world, all those things are now broken down," Natarajan explained.

Masks with your face on it

One example of how AI is already being used is masks with your face on it. Using face masks is one of the primary ways of exercising caution advocated by health agencies, even the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Photo studios in Kerala are using the opportunity to print masks with partial faces on them so that people can still recognise you as you go about town. "This is a classical case of very low hanging fruit of use of AI — facial recognition, take an image and put in on a mask," said Natarajan.

"You see a new business for that operator — an MSME. They differentiated among other mask producers in the market," he added.



IBM's AI technology — its Watson Assistant — has been helping the Indian Center of Medical Research (ICMR) to diagnose and report coronavirus tests all over the country. Its supercomputers being used to try and find a cure. And, according to Natarajan — **AI is here to stay.**

Enterprises are going to use it to ensure that working from home is more secure and that operations don't bear the brunt of social distancing. MSMEs will use it to differentiate themselves from the crowd.

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