



10 Tips For an Effective Opening Prompt

You get only one shot at making a good first impression. In an Interactive Voice Response system (IVR), such an impression is formed by callers and conveyed by Voice User Interface (VUI) designers with the application's opening prompt.^[1]

When writing your system's opening prompt, keep the following three basic VUI guidelines in mind:

1. **Be brief:** Belabored, verbose opening prompts confirm the worst stereotype of the dumb, overbearing IVR system. If you force callers to listen to 30 seconds of instructions, information, and disclaimers before they can take the first step towards solving their problem, you have not only started your caller out on the wrong note, but have given the caller a whole 30 seconds to push the zero-out button.
2. **Be concise:** Each and every single word in your opening prompt needs to be absolutely indispensable. If you can get rid of a word without losing meaning or effectiveness, do it.
3. **Be polite:** Politeness is not simply icing on the cake of a good VUI design. A system that is respectful of callers is a system that is attentive to caller needs, and therefore a system that will, in the final analysis, help callers successfully accomplish the task they called about.

The following are 10 tips, guided by the above three VUI guidelines, that can help you craft an effective opening prompt.

1. **Drop the "Welcome to..."**

Instead of "Welcome to XYZ," why not simply have your application announce your company's name, preceded or followed by an audio icon, and then followed by your company's tag line, if you have one? Such an opening will not only set your IVR apart from the garden variety ones but will shorten the length of your opening prompt.

1. **Drop the "Thank you for calling..."**

Certainly an acceptable and pleasant enough opening, but again one that is also widely used by your run-of-the-mill IVR systems out there. Set your application apart with the simple opening described above and save two seconds of prompt time.

2. **Use an audio icon**

An audio icon is not only an effective way of signaling to callers that they are interacting with an automated system, but also a good way of communicating to callers that the system has been designed and crafted with care. The implication is that the company being called cares about its customers and will work hard to ensure that callers are satisfied.



4. Have the system refer to itself as "I"

Empirical studies have shown that callers like to have the system refer to itself with the personal "I" rather than the impersonal "system".^[2]

5. Drop "You can interrupt me at any time"

Empirical studies have shown that callers simply do not register the instruction, "you can interrupt me at any time", especially when placed at the opening prompt. So you may as well drop it.

6. Drop for "For English..."

If your application is multi-lingual and you need a language selector, drop the "For English" option from the list of language options if your application starts off speaking in English. Have it pause 1.5 or 2.0 seconds after the language instructions have completed and then proceed with the rest of the prompt in English.

7. Establish that they can use speech

If your application is speech enabled, make sure that your opening prompt conveys that upfront. Have the first interaction ask them to answer a yes/no question, for instance, by explicitly saying, "you can say 'yes' or 'no'".

8. Don't mention the web site upfront

Chances are good that the people calling you not only already know that you have a web site, but that they found your phone number on the web site. Unless this is not the case (your callers are answering an infomercial, for instance), don't risk insulting your callers' intelligence or making them feel that you really don't want to interact with them over the phone. If you have to mention the web site, try to mention a specific page where they can find help (e.g., <http://www.Angel/faq>), and mention it at moments where you have determined that the help they are seeking could be obtained via the web. A good place to mention the web site is at the closing of the call.

9. Postpone the call-recording disclaimer

If you are only recording interactions between callers and live agents, not the automated part of calls, then delay the obligatory message, "this call may be recorded for quality assurance purposes" to just before the call is being transferred to a live agent. Such disclaimers not only lengthen the opening prompt but have come to be taken as a cue that the caller is about to be transferred to a live agent and may needlessly frustrate callers when no such transfer follows.

10. Turn off your "barge in"

If you are speech-enabling your voice site, make sure that you turn the "barge-in" on your application off. Background noise of a caller's inadvertent speech utterance may trip the opening prompt, resulting in a no-match in the first few seconds of the

interaction. And you really don't want to start the call with, "sorry, I didn't understand that...." The only time you should turn barge-in on at the opening prompt is if the majority of your callers are frequent callers who know exactly what to say or push and may (and will) be irritated if they are forced to listen to the opening prompt, no matter how brief.

