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SPEECH TECHNOLOGY

How to Create an

IVR System

Your Customers Will
Actually Use





Contributors



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How to Create an IVR System Your Customers Will Actually Use

BY MICHAEL ZIRNGIBL

There's a reason people hate calling a phone number they know has an automated system on the other end of it: The system never learns. Put yourself in the shoes of your callers and consider the greeting and menu sequence they hear:

Thank you for calling.
Your call is very important
to us!



Ah, yes. The same boring, unoriginal
greeting you've heard every time you call
this company.

Please note that our menu
options have changed.



They have? Because they sound like
the same options from my last call. And
the call before that...

For English, press one.



Your teeth are grinding now; haven't
they learned that you press one for
English every time you call?

Please select from the
following menu options.



Just for kicks, you actually wait to lis-
ten to each menu option. You know, in
case they've changed. They haven't, of
course.

Please hold, we will be
with you shortly.



And so it begins.

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One complaint that comes up time and time again with most IVR systems is the abundance of confusing or irrelevant menu options that accompany even the simplest of requests.

From an IVR developer's standpoint, nothing is more frustrating than encountering yet another boring, confusing, unintelligent IVR system. That's because the technology exists – right now – to build IVR systems that are fast and easy to deploy and make the end user's call experience accurate and enjoyable.

So why doesn't this happen? In many companies, there are several stakeholders that influence the development of an IVR system. Call center managers obviously have strong input; they want an IVR system that automates as many functions as possible, resulting in as few calls to live agents as possible. On the other hand, your IT department will groan that an overly complex IVR will be tough to program properly and even tougher to alter or upgrade. Sales and marketing teams want to interject brand messaging, C-level executives have their own ideas on what to include... the list keeps getting bigger.

There should really be only one consideration when designing an IVR system – making it as easy as possible for end users, your customers and prospects, to interact with your company as easily and pleasantly as possible. With that as your single guiding principle, here are five ways to create an IVR system that your customers will actually use:

Create an Effective Opening

You get only one shot at making a good first impression. When writing your system's opening prompt, keep the following three basic guidelines in mind – be brief, be concise and be polite.

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 be-

fore they can take the first step toward 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.

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.

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.

Know Your Customers

One complaint that comes up time and time again with most IVR systems is the abundance of confusing or irrelevant menu options that accompany even the simplest of requests. These off-the-mark choices are the result of a company's incomplete knowledge of their callers and the information they seek when they call in.

The first step to creating a customer-friendly IVR is to research exactly why customers call you. What information do they seek? Do they call for the same reasons repeatedly? What details must they possess, such as passwords or account numbers, to get the answers they need? Once you have a clear picture of how callers use your phone system, you'll identify common questions and requests for information that can be accommodated through your IVR system.

But to really demonstrate customer knowledge and make your IVR system a valuable resource, personalize caller interactions by integrating your IVR with customer databases. Today's CRM tools exist for just this purpose: to build connections between company and caller.

These connections occur on the Web every day, and they can occur over the phone just as quickly and easily with the right IVR tools. Hosted IVR solutions that integrate with CRM systems can personalize the caller experience by instantly recognizing the caller's phone number and tailoring menu options based on additional customer data, such as purchase history or results of previous calls.

So instead of hearing, "Thank you for your call! Please listen carefully as our

menu options have changed," callers may hear "Hello again Mr. Smith! Would you like a status update on your open trouble ticket?" Sure, callers may be surprised when your IVR system "remembers" their information, but they will appreciate the individualized customer service.

Avoid Common Pitfalls

One of the surest ways to create a successful IVR application is to avoid many of the common traps that make them so unfriendly to so many users. Here are five such pitfalls to avoid:

Don't use throwaway phrases - We mentioned a few of them at the start of the article. Phrases such as "Please listen carefully, our menu options have changed," are, at best, inaccurate, inconsequential and annoying. At worst, they distract and confuse users, prompting them to abandon the IVR in favor of a live agent - exactly the action they're supposedly designed to avoid. Instead of using these throwaway phrases, focus on creating clear and concise prompts and instructions.

Establish speech recognition up front - A speech-enabled IVR system represents a substantial investment in time and money from your company. Don't bury this important capability; instead, make it immediately clear that users can employ voice commands to navigate the system, provide information and, yes, reach a live person.

Don't force users to repeat information - If a caller opts out of the IVR and reaches a live agent, any information provided before the opt-out should be available to the agent the moment the call is transferred. By picking up where the IVR left off, callers will feel more confident using the IVR in the future.

Delay mention of your website - Too often, IVR systems are quick to point callers to the company's website as an alternative resource for their question. There are several problems with this strategy; most notably it assumes callers would rather use the web than the phone, and that you would rather callers use the web than the phone.

If you feel you must mention the website, try to mention a specific page where they can find help, 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 website is at the closing of the call.

Use effective error-handling strategies - Callers liken their IVR experience to having a conversation with a real person. When two people don't understand each other, they ask questions or rephrase statements to keep the conversation moving. Your system should employ similar conversational utilities to keep callers engaged in the process and confident that misunderstandings will be easily resolved.

If a misunderstanding occurs, your system should provide polite error-handling because recovery strategies are another area that can make or break your IVR system. If callers foresee that one misunderstanding will result in unnecessary confusion, they will be more upset when they demand to speak to a live agent, and overall, less likely to engage the system in the future.

Avoid Overstuffing

In the IVR world, we use the term "elegant" to describe how a well-engineered speech-enabled IVR system handles its tasks. It's a simple rule of thumb: Any task that can't be performed elegantly by an end user through the automated system should be directed to a live agent.

With the highly advanced speech recognition and data management technologies employed in today's IVR systems, it's tempting for companies (and IVR providers) to try to automate as many tasks as possible. But overstuffed IVR systems are unwieldy to navigate and often wind up driving more traffic to live agents - the opposite of what they're designed to do.

Once you've analyzed your current call center needs and created a wish list of features you'd like in your IVR system, sit down with your IVR provider to determine which tasks can be handled elegantly for end users through a speech-enabled system.

Involve Customer Service

An automated IVR system is a major touchpoint for your company's end users. It conveys as much about your brand image and selling proposition as any advertising and marketing campaign.

Rather than limit IVR design to business owners and executives, involve call center representatives and marketing managers. These customer-facing employees will lend invaluable insight into what your end users will find most helpful. **CP**