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Simple Error Recovery Strategies

The quality of an interactive voice system is judged not only by how the system handles its interactions with human callers when everything is going smoothly, but also by how it navigates situations when things don't proceed as expected. In this issue of VUI View, we explore four simple error recovery strategies that should markedly improve both caller satisfaction and system performance.

Use helpful prompts

As mentioned in last month's newsletter, you should take the time to craft your no-input and no-match prompts to provide callers with information that will help them recover. Don't just tell them that they need to say something or that the system did not understand what they said - tell them that you expect them to say something and what you expect them to say.

Providing explicit examples of what is expected is usually the best way to obtain the correct wording from callers. For instance, upon a no-input or a no-match, instead of simply asking, "Please provide your birth date," the system should ask, "Please provide your birth date. For instance, you can say, 'June 15, 1970.'"

It is also important to provide the caller with the option of seeking more detailed instructions by saying, "help." For question pages that expect the caller to provide keyword phrase responses, a good practice is to associate with each question page its very own help message page that can provide context-sensitive help beyond general instructions on how to use the system.

Use smart re-prompting

Smart re-prompting means paying attention to the flow of prompts when a no-input or no-match occurs. If a question page opens with the following prompt: "Great! Now, how many cigarettes do you smoke each day?" and the caller says nothing in response, a smart re-prompt would be something like, "Sorry, I didn't hear you. Please say a number between 1 and 100. How many cigarettes do you smoke each day?" A not so smart re-prompt would say, "Sorry, I didn't hear you. Please say a number between 1 and 100. Great! Now how many cigarettes do you smoke each day?"

To avoid the occurrence of such jarring interactions, make sure that for pages that open with conversation markers (e.g. "Great!" "Now" "First" "One more thing" etc.), the re-prompt on the no-input and the no-match is turned off. Also make sure that the prompts for the no-input and the no-match contain the information the caller will need to provide the correct input.

Know what to do next

Equally important to knowing what to say when an error occurs is knowing what to do after the number of error recovery tries has reached its limit.

The default behavior for voice pages is to restart from the beginning. However, at times, starting things from the top may not be the best "next-step" strategy. Take the time to ensure that you explicitly select the next voice page destination for each voice page in your voice site.

Here are some alternative strategies for selecting what to do next:

1. Just move on: in cases where the failure to collect the information sought is not a show stopper - e.g. a survey, where partial data collected from the caller is still useful - the system should simply move to the next question page after the final no-input or no-match.
2. Transfer to a human operator.
3. Say goodbye and hang up.

Use error pages

Voice applications that use transaction pages should always have an error page associated with each transaction page. You can associate an error page with a transaction page by clicking on the "Advanced Options" tab for the transaction page and then selecting the corresponding error page from the "Error Destination" drop down menu.