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Top 10 VUI No-Nos

1. Don't use open ended prompts

An example of an open ended prompt is: "How can I help you?" A pleasant and friendly enough prompt, but how is the caller supposed to answer it? Will the caller state what they expect the system to do or will they describe the problem they are facing? What if they don't know what the system can do to help them (which is often the case), or know only in general terms? And even if they did know, how are they going to articulate their expectations? More often, the answer a caller will give to such a question is a description of the problem they are having. But for any given problem situation, there is literally an endless way that problem can be described. What wording are they going to use?

The safest bet is to avoid making assumptions about the caller's familiarity with the system and to always explicitly prompt them for what you expect them to say.

2. Make sure that you don't have endless loops

Another killer VUI mistake that novice Voice application designers and developers make is to leave endless loops in their voice applications. An example of an endless loop would be a path that takes the caller to the beginning of an application on a final no match somewhere in the application. Few things frustrate and anger callers more than having to go back to the beginning and start from scratch when the application fails to understand what the caller said (no match) or fails to give them proper directions on what to do (no input). Ensure that all of the behavior on your final no input or no match avoids endless loops.

3. Don't use text to speech unless you have to

No matter how good a text to speech (TTS) engine may be, it can never beat the human voice. TTS is meant to be used in one of the following two situations: (1) For rapid development of your Voice Site so that you can build your call flow, call it and test it, and feel comfortable that the voice application is doing what you need it to do. The expectation is that once the call flow is complete, all prompts will be recorded in human voice. (2) For situations where the information you need to give back to the caller is dynamic: for instance, you are querying a database for an address that you want to read back.

There is really no valid reason to use TTS for static prompts that you use to instruct the caller on what to say or do. At the very least, record over the TTS versions of your prompts by calling in and pressing "*7" or saying "record" as you are listening to the prompt.

4. Don't mix voice and text to speech

Unless you have no choice, avoid mixing recorded prompts with TTS. A "hybrid" prompt will always sound jarring, and often even more jarring than a straight TTS prompt. Someone listening to a prompt that starts off in a pleasant human voice will not be straining their ear to carefully listen for a sudden burst of TTS. Chances are that a "hybrid" prompt will need to be repeated, and at the very least, the designer should offer the caller the option of repeating the prompt.

Site Builder provides the "Smart Play" facility precisely to help the designer avoid mixing voice and TTS.

5. Don't put into your prompt something that your grammar can't handle

Callers take their cue on how to respond and articulate their answers from the system they are interacting with. If the system uses slang or colloquialisms, chances are that the caller will mimic that behavior. Unless your system can handle "right on" for "yes" and "no dice" for "no," keep to the standard but predictable "yes" and "no."

6. Don't repeat the same prompt over and over again

Another system behavior that callers find highly irritating is heedless prompt repetition; i.e. - upon a no match or a no input, the system repeats verbatim the prompt that just preceded the failure. Callers find such behavior insensitive, aggressive, and even hostile. The caller's perception is that the application wants them to bend to the system's demand, and more often than not, a mini tug-of-war between the caller and the system ensues.

The system should never be perceived as trying to force the caller to behave in one way or another. Ideally, the interaction should flow cooperatively, with the caller viewing the system as trying to guide them and help solve their problem. At any time where the caller is not following instructions, the system should assume responsibility for the error and reword the request.

For a more detailed discussion on error recovering and re-prompting, see the "Simple Error Recovery Strategies" issue of VUI View.

7. Don't force callers to listen to long prompts

Speech is not only time-linear but is uni-directional. In other words, you have to hear a word before you can hear the one that follows it, and you can't easily go back and forth from a word to one that preceded it. As a result, long prompts are a big imposition on callers, especially if they can't interrupt or skip them. Don't abuse the patience of your callers with unnecessarily long, verbose prompts.

If you expect callers to call your application more than once, ask upfront if they are first time users, and if they are not, interact with them from that point on with short and sweet prompts. A simple way of doing this is to have two versions of your voice site: a verbose version and a succinct version. Of course, whenever possible, allow for interruptions and inform the caller that they can interrupt - especially when you are presenting callers with a menu of choices.

8. Don't switch modes on the caller

There are two modes of interaction in a Speech IVR application: touch tone and voice. Callers don't mind using either, but they do mind being forced to switch from one mode to the other, or having a mode taken away from them for no good reason. If a caller is given the ability to respond with speech, give them that ability across the application.

The only time that taking speech away is acceptable is during error recovery. Callers do not mind having to revert to touch tone as long as the system explains to them why they are being asked to go to touch tone.

9. Don't go quiet for more than 3 seconds

Silence is golden, but not during an IVR application. When the system is expected to respond, the caller will

interpret silence as a sign that something went wrong.

To ensure that the caller is not thrown into confusion, the application should always make some sound indicating that it is in possession of the conversational turn. The Angel platform by default will play a percolating sound whenever processing a request is taking more than one second.

The application developer can go one step further and make use of the "prompts" tab in Transaction Pages and provide either an "Initial Prompt" and/or a "Wait Prompt."

The "initial prompt" is played while the system awaits the completion of the request submitted to a remote server. The prompt plays in full, even if the server request returns prior to the completion of the prompt.

The "wait prompt" is also played while the system waits for the remote server to respond, but it is played in a loop and is interrupted as soon as the request from the remote server has returned.

10. Don't listen for short words

Instead of listening for "help," instruct the caller to say, "help me;" instead of "home," ask them to say "go home;" instead of "repeat," use "repeat that;" instead of "go," use "continue." Short words are hard to recognize by the system and if more than one are used within the same context, they will be confused with each other. Callers get more irritated having their utterance misrecognized than simply having to say "repeat that" instead of "repeat." Exploit the fact that callers will mimic what you instruct them to say (as long as you are clear about what you want from them) to increase the level of your recognition accuracy.