



Technology Optimization Part 6: Interactive Voice Response

By Lori Bocklund, President

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My friends and family love to tell me their latest miserable customer interaction experiences, and I bet yours do too. I'd also bet that when you meet new people and they ask you what you do, you have a bit of pride as you explain your role in servicing customers, but then you brace yourself for their response. More often than not, your new acquaintance will offer an animated account of a recent IVR horror story. Of course the good news is you can readily share your favorite nightmare, and are quickly fast friends with something in common. The bad news is they want you to fix all those bad systems out there or make them go away. It's time IVR stopped being a conversation piece and started being a centerpiece of service excellence.

IVR is the doorway into your business. Your prompts, menus, requests for identifying information, and self-service offerings may form your customers' first – and lasting – impressions. What does your IVR application say about your company? Do you hold the door open with a warm and welcoming invitation, or do you send customers down a dark, narrow hallway before they can come into your business, and then ask them, "Who are you and what are you doing here?" Here are a few factors common to inductees into the IVR Hall of Shame:

- Wordy prompts with too many choices (and the worst scenario – choices out of order!... to do X, press 7, to do Y, press 4...)
- Menu options that "dead end" and offer no way out
- No confirmation to assure callers that their transactions were completed successfully (and therefore assuring they want to talk to someone anyway!)
- Uneven voice quality and volume, with multiple voices
- Requests for information that callers must repeat when they (finally) reach a service representative
- Touch tone applications that are much too complicated, and should either be done via Automated Speech Response (ASR) or left to web or live agent interactions
- ASR with low accuracy rates, inducing callers to shout their responses into the phone and beg for human interaction
- Inadequate reporting and analysis to understand how callers interact with the application and where improvements could be made

If you want to improve containment rates and inflict less pain and suffering on your customers - and actually welcome them into your business - here are some things you can do to optimize IVR technology and its application in the center:

1. Get your hands on a set of IVR best practices (just do a quick search and you'll find many) and use them to audit your applications. You can assign this as a special project, or ask your CSRs to chip in during lulls in contact center activity. If you've got the budget, hire an expert to guide your assessment and design changes. Document "quick hit" fixes – e.g., establish consistent navigation, refine scripts, remove unnecessary prompts or self service applications, remove dead ends, re-record using professional voice talent in a studio. Then find a way to make those changes happen soon.
2. Set up a routine optimization plan. Make frequent calls into the system to assess performance. Develop a quality review protocol for IVR calls to hear how customers interact with and react to your system. Ask CSRs about the feedback they receive from customers. Summarize findings for quarterly



reviews with IVR stakeholders (contact center, IT, and perhaps business units and marketing). Discuss what's working and what needs to change and build and execute action plans accordingly.

3. Identify new applications that could reduce call volumes and build the business case for their implementation. Here are some key factors to consider with new applications:
 - As you plan for new applications, give careful consideration regarding when to use touch tone and when to use ASR for your user interface. Focus on the user needs, expectations, and demographics. And keep in mind you may need to offer both.
 - Include a plan for integrating IVR with your other contact center technologies if you don't already. Bring an expert on board to help with design. [You don't do yourself any favors by pinching pennies here!]
 - Do lots of usability testing with real customers and incorporate their feedback into the design before you go into production.
 - Build proper reporting capabilities into your designs and use them to analyze and optimize your applications.