WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR IVR?

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Contact Center
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IVR still has a future, albeit an evolving one.

BY LORI BOCKLUND, STRATEGIC CONTACT

I recently saw this jarring headline from the BBC: "Will we stop speaking and just text?" If that's not enough to make you wonder if there is a future for interactive voice response (IVR), ponder some more questions: What percent of your customers wield a smartphone? Might your customer demographic increasingly prefer texting over calling? How many of them start in apps or online portals, knowing those tools make inquiries and transactions easier? Then, count the number of marketing emails you got in the last week touting how "bots" will transform your center and the customer experience. It's enough to make even the most ardent IVR fan pause.

The flipside of all this enthusiasm for voice alternatives is that phone calls still constitute a substantial volume, if not the majority of contacts, for most centers. Some readers may have an IVR that handles a double-digit percentage of their contacts, and would protest mightily if it were taken away.

So yes, IVR still has a future, albeit an evolving one. Unfortunately, many old, bad IVRs are idling away as their owners look the other way, hoping nobody will notice. But customers feel the pain every day. It's time to do something!

Do Nothing Is a Temptation, Not an Option

We see common situations in our contact center assessment projects: The IVR needs fixing. It's been static for years. But nobody thinks it matters too much. Or they are afraid to touch it, out of fear it will "break" something. Without reports, they lack visibility to the problems and the data to show the potential value of changes. In the rarer cases where awareness exists, they often feel it is too big a problem to fix. It involves multiple departments. They lack internal resources with IVR know-how, creating more inertia around how to find an available, qualified third party, not to mention the budget to pay for their services. At the same time, other emerging channels seem to demand more attention... and money, and resources. IVR is passé, so why bother!

No matter how much you may feel like it's not worth the investment or you don't know where to start, you can't take a passive approach. IVR plays a critical role as the "front door" or "concierge," providing routing segmentation to guide people to the right agents. For some verticals like financial services and utilities, it still provides substantial self-service. And in many cases, IVR plays a key role in authentication, identifying and verifying customers to ensure a secure transaction, whether they self-serve or seek assistance.

Tossing the IVR out is not an option either, unless you have a major initiative, supported by a commensurate investment in additional staff. Model the "what-if" of moving calls handled by the IVR to agents, and be prepared for a startling impact on handle time without the IVR front-ending routing and identification. You will be dismayed as you look at metrics like service level and cost.

Other ripple-effects, like the impact of not segmenting call types and subsequently driving more transfers or lengthening training as you try to create "universal agents," can be dramatic as well.

Do Something—for Salvageable Platforms

If your IVR technology isn't too old and out of support from your vendor, fixing your IVR starts with assessing the current state. The cardinal sins we see include:

- Bad user interfaces, characterized by long menus, non-consecutive numbers, too many choices, dead ends, etc. Admit it, you hate these, too!
- Non-professional menu recordings with varying voices, poor quality or "voice talent" who simply lack the skills or vocal quality for the task.
- No screen pop or use of information already gathered in the IVR, leading to the dreaded customer experience of repeating what they (painfully, perhaps reluctantly) just entered!
- Little to no reporting, much less analysis and optimization, perpetuating the "ignorance is bliss" mindset that so often clouds IVRs!

The top targets for change should address each of these issues. Improve identification and verification to address both security and success rates, then use that information. Simplify by getting rid of the clutter, removing unused or little used options and paths. Tweak, if not revamp, scripting, menus and prompts, and re-record where appropriate with appropriate voice talent. Integrate so nobody ever feels abused with repetition. And institute better reporting and analytics so you can evaluate and improve going forward.

While you're at it, consider whether you underutilize the IVR and decide if you can muster the resources to move beyond *fixing* to *enhancing*. Dynamic menus that use data about the customer (like account status, past behavior) have been possible for a long time, but few have implemented these valuable improvements. You may be able to add speech, which can improve the interface *and* lead to greater customer success. And if your customers are likely smartphone users, explore the "visual IVR" options that enable you to make interacting easier.
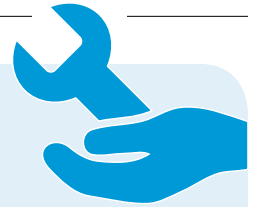
Do Major Things—for Replacement Platforms

If you're in the worst-case situation, with an out-of-support platform that is so brittle you are afraid to make any changes, it's really time for action. Yes, you must invest, but do so with an eye toward the future, since you must buy a new platform anyway. Consider using a cloud-based platform, and perhaps a managed service, instead of buying technology. Determine the best sourcing strategy given your near-term and longer-term plans. In the process, you can give yourself more agility and ability to change how you use the solution over time. With the cloud, vendors will evolve, and you can move with them. If you opt for an on-premise solution, put processes in place to avoid a static approach to investment once the IVR implementation is "complete."

Look at a variety of vendor types, because it's not just "IVR vendors" that sell IVRs anymore. Solutions can come from a core contact center technology vendor, workforce optimization vendor or a niche vendor. Some are "bot" vendors, or multi/omnichannel solution providers. And since a big part of what you are buying is services and know how (not just technology), keep in mind that many vendor partners or value-added resellers (VARs) bring specialty expertise to the IVR.

So, if you're in this now enviable position of seeking a whole new IVR, do all the things outlined above for those that are "fixing" but approach it with a clean slate. You may be able to leverage vertical packages, proven vocabularies and pre-built reports. You may be able to more easily integrate with a modern solution and its APIs. Speech and dynamic menus can be things you do out of the gates to improve your customer experience and drive greater IVR success. See, things are looking much better already!

Prepare for the "New IVR"

Whether on an old platform or new one, as you plan and pursue changes, be mindful of what the new IVR will look like. Define the role natural language will play. Speech recognition is more accurate now, as it can leverage more context (data) and even artificial intelligence (AI). Users are also more comfortable with it as they use it on phones and with other applications, so may be more likely to engage with it, and even like it!

Bots and AI will play a major role (See "Imagining the Possibilities with AI" in the July 2018 issue).

AI will enhance natural language success, as well as the call flow, and it can play a big role in analytics, leading to optimization. These tools will keep the IVR dynamic in every way.

While IVR is all about voice, a new IVR should consider omnichannel. Your IVR could come from the same vendor and platform as solutions that offer chat or text interfaces, and the vendor (or partner) could bring that broader expertise as well. Link IVR to digital channels by considering a call from a mobile app or a website. Use what a customer has done in those other channels, including their authentication and actions.

Use data to optimize each step of the customer interaction. A context-aware IVR is a smarter IVR. It enhances what the IVR can do and improves the customer success rate. With data and AI, the IVR can go beyond "if... then..." into predictive service, guiding and offering the best fit for the situation and behavior. The result is the low level of effort sought for the customer experience, along with high level of success measured by containment, successful authentication and proper routing.

You may also want to consider some other value-added applications that an IVR can provide, depending on your call flow and hot buttons. For example, voice biometrics may be important to prevent fraud and ease authentication. Eventually, Alexa or other personal assistant interfaces may come into play as a new front end to the IVR (it's not just about "phone calls" anymore). This interface can leverage the same kinds of things as the phone call, such as natural language and AI.

Is There a Future for IVR?

Customers won't stop talking to centers (by choice or necessity), at least not any time soon. If you have an IVR, there is a good chance it plays an important role in your center. Unfortunately, there is also a pretty good chance it is not so good. Whether you need a new platform, or just some improvements, it's time to do something, and do it with an eye toward the future with this changing but still very important technology. ⊕

> *Use data to optimize each step of the customer interaction.*

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What to Do with Your IVR? Fix It or Replace It!

Don't let your IVR start your customers off on a lousy journey! Make it good today, and better in the future.

HERE'S WHAT YOU *MUST* HAVE FOR A GOOD USER EXPERIENCE AND BUSINESS SUCCESS:

- Good user interface—script, menus, navigation, timing
- Good call flow—logical, simple, smart
- Alternatives—including an easy way out!
- Integration—passing information already entered
- Reporting and analytics—to know what's working and what's not

AND AS YOU LOOK FORWARD, HERE'S WHAT YOU *COULD* PURSUE:

- Speech enabled
- Context aware
- Artificial intelligence enhanced
- Omnichannel aligned

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