

# Not Your Mother's IVR

With today's technology advances, the time is right to redefine the role IVR plays in the contact center and the overall customer experience.

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**T**hose of us who make our living in and around contact centers know that sinking feeling when someone asks you what you do. You offer up your proudest spin on service excellence, and then brace yourself for the “horror story” about their recent customer interaction or the diatribe about “those darn systems” real people too often hide behind. Without fail, an interactive voice response system (IVR) is the culprit at the center of this denunciation. You try not to take it personally, and proceed to defend the broader industry as well as your own center and company.

It doesn't have to be this way. Imagine a world where the response from your new acquaintance is to regale you with stories about cool and wonderful experiences with voice interactions. Companies have stopped wasting time and money on bad applications and instead leverage the technology to optimize customer interactions and corporate outcomes. There are times when I've been accused of being an optimist; in this case, I'll happily take the title. Follow me into this vision of what can be, and you'll make the customer contact world a better place.

### Time for Change

In this truly multichannel world, we need to start our vision by defining where IVR fits. Its traditional role of trying to get (aka “force”) customers to self-serve may be in decline. More “self-servers” use the web, mobile applications, social media and kiosks to tend to their needs. When people pick up their phones and call, chances are they really want to talk to someone. They've either exhausted other options or didn't want to use them in the first place. And they don't want to be badgered with painful menus and long pathways that sometimes lead to dead ends. A company risks major customer irritation by trying to force fit IVR—especially in this era of “customer experience management” and “voice of the customer” focus.

So IVR is getting reinvented, reinvigorated and reapplied. Based on today's technology architectures and advances, improved applications and interfaces, and smarter deployments and optimization, IVR can take on new roles and serve its traditional roles with intelligence and customization to a given customer's needs and desires. Maybe in this “makeover,” IVR needs a new name: It's tough to shed that bad image when the name remains the same. Unlike a rose that might smell sweet no matter what we call it, IVR can change its scent by being thought of more like a Personal Customer Care Concierge. So let's define what the “PCCC” or Voice Concierge (or whatever you want to call it) looks like.

### Innovation Delivers Change

I want to highlight six key innovations that have the potential to create the positive change we all seek for voice interactions.

#### 1. CALL STEERING AND CALLER IDENTIFICATION

IVR has long had a role in identifying who is calling and why, but now it can be smarter with improved integration, personalization and customization, and intelligent interfaces. We'll cover the role that each of these plays, but the bottom line is, they collectively position the IVR to be a concierge: something a customer chooses to use, and that can, with a little insight on who they are and what they're looking for, offer the guidance they seek in a friendly (and non-threatening) way. Customers willingly provide a bit of information to get what they want, knowing that it's necessary and worthwhile to quickly guide them onto the right path for their needs. One of my favorite IVRs (yes, you can have favorites!) reassures me as it asks for a little information that it will use it to get me to the right place and provide it to the person who receives my call.



### 2. PERSONALIZATION AND CUSTOMIZATION

Taking the step to personalize and customize the prompts and menus a caller experiences really moves companies toward true “CRM” applied to phone calls. Building on the concierge analogy, this approach captures preferences, past usage patterns, customer information and status along with logic in the application to present appropriate choices and guidance. Customers experience simplified menus, proactively receive relevant updates or status (and avoid enduring irrelevant or unwanted information), and only go down paths that make sense given their relationship and status.

### 3. IMPROVED INTERFACE

Improved interfaces are about more than just scripts and designs. Companies can offer better and fewer applications (the RIGHT ones) because so many other good channels exist. The IVR is basically freed of the burden of trying to do it all—much like the hotel concierge may have less to do as many turn to their smartphones or tablets with free Wi-Fi access for directions, restaurants or guidance on what to do and where.

Intelligent IVR planners consider IT “level of effort” to avoid building applications that can't deliver value because it is too expensive to build, integrate and maintain (and, as a result, often suffers from short cuts). They also consider caller level of effort, involving customers and CSRs in design through focus groups, as well as various forms of testing. Usability testing, which can include “Wizard of Oz” testing and observations with interviews, enlightens even the best designers.

Analytics can be used to optimize applications. Both data and speech analytics can reveal what's working and what's not, and help identify opportunities for tuning applications and interfaces. Analytics offerings vary from one-time (or few-time) to ongoing, purchasing services or products. Today's cross-channel analytics also hold an important role, ensuring that companies don't look at IVR in a vacuum and really understand the full customer experience across channels.

And let's not forget, *speech recognition* is better than ever, and combined with smarter design, offers the option to select touch-tone rather than speech. *Text to speech* has a growing role in providing dynamic information, and does so with an increasingly natural sound. A few are even dabbling with *voice recognition* as an added layer of security where the enrollment process can be justified and valuable to both the customer and the company. Each of these elements, properly applied, helps improve the interface and rehabilitates IVR's tarnished reputation.

### 4. ARCHITECTURAL CHANGES

In today's architectures, the IVR can serve as the holding position in queue and provide customized call treatment (announcements, prompts and music, if appropriate). In this sense, it sits “in front of” the voice system and plays an important role in routing the call, tapping into the previous three elements. Many centers opt to offer the option for callback, further focusing on the customer and what is best for them (and what just might happen to be best for the company, in the right scenarios).

Session initiation protocol (SIP) holds the promise of easier integration of customer data with the phone contact. While we've been able to pop screens at agent desktops based on IVR-entered information for 25 years, we still have a long way to go to get everyone to use it. Perhaps now that it's “easy,” it can become commonplace. Leveraging that information through integration would get each call started on the right foot.

With its role as a “voice portal” and the combination of technologies and application capa-

bilities described above, the IVR can readily tap the same underlying data and applications as web or other interfaces. IT can build and maintain the information and logic once, in one place. If it's most convenient to the customer to call in to get updates, provide information or conduct straightforward transactions, they can do so via a voice channel with the promise of success and common outcomes with other channels.

### 5. OUTBOUND NOTIFICATION AND ALERTS


IVR can deliver automated messages with options to confirm, take other action and/or speak to someone. The potential for outbound notification and alerts is so great, I wrote a whole article on it (see "Proactive Outbound Contact," *Pipeline*, July 2011). When messages are personalized and customized, they truly offer a "wow" factor for customers and can preempt more expensive or less timely inbound contacts for the company. This application is like having personal assistants at my bank, airlines, insurance provider, retailer, insurer and others who look out for me based on things that might be of concern or interest. I'm busy, you're busy. Imagine if we all just knew things were being taken care of for us and that, if we need to know, they'll get in touch. That's the vision.

### 6. AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

I can't leave my list without mentioning something that I find intriguing: agent-supported IVR. This one has not (and may not) "cross the chasm"; it's not a mainstream, majority approach. But some big-name companies are using IVR in some very non-traditional ways.

We all know that IVR technology is imperfect, and sometimes wish a person would just get on to help guide us to the right place or answer. Imagine that you're interacting with an automated interface, but there are people behind it to pitch in and sort things out when the technology can't do it alone. They can help you and others at the same time, because they are working in concert with the IVR, each doing what they do best but being better together (dare I say synergistically?). I think I might have seen this on some sci-fi show way back when. Anyway, in a pinch, you might still need to talk to a REAL LIVE PERSON and that's still possible but, in most situations, the "automated" application will succeed because it has got humans behind it to help when needed.

### All That's Old Can Be New Again

So many companies are embarking on transitions for their IVR—replacing old technology platforms or looking for improvements to existing technology and how it is applied. So the time is ripe to redefine the vision of what IVR is to your center and your customers. Whether premise or hosted IVR, if you're going to do it, do it right and you can reap the benefits. Build a strategy in line with your overall plans for contact center technology, the rest of your IT infrastructure and applications, and your multichannel vision. Pursue appropriate changes to IVR through a phased approach, and commit the proper resources for ongoing analysis and optimization. By doing so, you will start to write some new, positive stories for customers to share when they meet someone from the contact center industry. 

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**Can Everybody Really Win?**

So I said you could call me an optimist, even though I think of myself as a realist. The pessimists among us may be thinking there is no such thing as a “win-win.” In spite of technology advances, IVR (or whatever pretty name we want to put on it) is still a pig and you don't put lipstick on a pig. Well, realistically or optimistically, I can argue that by taking advantage of these innovations, the company saves time (and therefore money) while enhancing the customer experience. Sounds to me like they both come out ahead.



Shorter queue times and handle times mean lower port and trunk counts and less long-distance minutes. IVR time goes down, and agent handle time can improve, as well. (Imagine the savings if every conversation jumped right to the relevant parts, free of whining, complaining and repeating.) Customers with lower level of effort, who get what they want, the way they want it, when they need it (and proactively!) are happy customers. Better customer experience can enhance loyalty and therefore sales, so there is not just a savings but a revenue generation potential. Less wasted IT time and dollars further sweetens the pot.

For everyone to win, however, leaders must have an open mind about how exceptional service is defined. They must be willing to change the approach and not be limited by old service strategies. If all else fails, listen to the customer. The “voice of the customer” will tell you how they define exceptional service and will arm you to look at your IVR in a new light.

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