



Not Dead Yet – IVR Lives On

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I know people who love the surfing the web, playing with their smartphones, texting anyone in their circle, or camping out on Facebook. I know people who just want to talk to someone – whether for any interaction (like dear old Mom), or when they need the back and forth of a conversation. But I don't know anyone who *prefers* IVRs. Do you? This situation begs the question: What will become of IVR as multi-channel customer interaction proliferates and companies expand and improve the “preferred” options? Well, it's not dead yet, and I don't think it will be any time soon. It's evolving to keep pace with the new market landscape.

Here is a quick survey of some interesting IVR activity:

- Vendors include IVR in their architecture as a built-in “front end.” As a robust holding point for call treatment, it provides useful information, offers the option of callback rather than wait in queue (along with queue status and target call back time), and, yes, even offers self service if desired.
- A key part of this front end is what some would call “call steering” or “front door” activity. The IVR gathers information to use to better serve customers: who they are and why they are calling. This is nothing new, but with better integration, companies can use that information to optimize routing and deliver the information gathered to the agent ultimately receiving the call.
- If the customer chooses self service, the company can make that interaction more personalized based on the knowledge of the customer and their need. Mass customization has arrived.
- IVR plays a big role in multi-channel outbound proactive alerting and notification. Do you want your outbound messages delivered via the phone, or do you prefer text, email, or fax? The IVR can work in parallel (notify me *and* my husband) or in series (send me an email or text message as a follow up to that call).
- The IVR is a dialer for outbound voice communications, delivering automated messages in some cases and connecting with agents in others. It can ask for validation or other input before connecting the caller to an agent. [*Perhaps it's the dialer as we knew it that's dead. Long live the reincarnated IVR?!*]
- The promise of speech recognition is being realized, along with improved text to speech. If you've interacted with a well designed, implemented and managed IVR of late, you may have noticed the more natural interface and the *option* to move to touch tone (not just because it can't figure out what the heck you're saying). Text to speech is used smartly for dynamic information and sounds more natural, avoiding user “turn off.”
- Some players are being so bold as to put a person behind the façade of an IVR interface. Call 1-800-MY APPLE and you'll be interacting with an IVR interface with a “driver” behind the scenes that is pitching in to make sure your interaction is optimized. Picture your favorite “gamer” or multi-tasker taking care of a number of customer interactions at once.



- Companies increasingly recognize the “level of effort” for the user and the IT department must be in line with the benefits that can be achieved. As a result, they involve users in design through focus groups. They apply improved tools and techniques for developing applications and ensuring effective design through usability testing. Enhanced analytics tools that tie IVR data to cross-channel activity further the cause of optimizing the customer experience and success rates. Tuning becomes a standard part of managing IVR interfaces.

In this new world, the IVR truly becomes a “portal” for customer experience over the phone. So it’s not dead, but pure self service on an IVR, by choice, may be in decline as customers decreasingly and reluctantly go to the phone, and if they do, they just want to talk to somebody. But rather than go the way of the dinosaur, the IVR is evolving to have an important place in the multi-channel world.