

Keeping Callers Happy with Your Voice Mail System

Your voice system may create a caller's first - and lasting - impression of your company. Whether you're developing a voice application for outside callers such as an hours of operation or automated order line, or for employees, such as a 401K information line, customer satisfaction should always be your goal.

Voice systems are a proven tool for achieving customer satisfaction. In a recent TMIA survey of organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada, respondents overwhelmingly said that voice mail not only improved productivity and internal communication, but also customer service. The survey also pointed out that improvements in customer service are directly tied to proper implementation and use of voice systems.

No matter what the size of your organization - or whether you're implementing plain vanilla voice technology, or a more sophisticated application linked to a host computer - how your application is designed has a lot to do with how satisfied your callers are.

This pages will show you how to:

- Implement your voice system right the first time, or make improvements to your current system.
- Keep all your customers happy by making your callers' needs a priority when developing voice applications.
- Improve productivity, responsiveness, and professionalism through applications that communicate the information your customers need, when they need it.

Planning: The key to a successful implementation

Implementation is more than just rolling in equipment and plugging it in. It involves closely examining your organization and the way you do business, or more importantly, the way you want to do business. A successful implementation always begins with thoroughly defining applications. By "applications" we mean the specific ways in which your callers will use the voice system - for example, to hear product information, place service orders or transfer funds. Follow these dos and don'ts to identify areas in your organization where a voice application can be a problem solver - or even a revenue generator.

Do

- Talk to department heads to get their support.
- Talk to customer service reps and others on the front lines of customer service about how callers are handled. Your applications should mirror this interaction as closely as possible.

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- Once you've developed a prototype, "Take it home to mother." Ask someone unfamiliar with the system to navigate through the options, to see how your application can be streamlined or improved.
- Consider developing training classes for employees so they can best support those calling into the system.

Don't

- Be careful not to overlook your customers. How do they want their calls handled?
- Don't develop applications just so someone won't have to answer a ringing phone.
- Avoid being self-centered. Look at what your competition is doing, and see how you can apply successful methods to your business.
- Don't reinvent the wheel. Work closely with your supplier - who has lots of practical experience - when defining your applications.
- Don't keep adding applications without making sure that you're making the most of the ones you have.

Designing your application

Rule 1 - Make it familiar

- Have your script mirror normal person-to-person communication as much as possible. Base the program on natural, high-quality, understandable speech.
- Use familiar terminology that callers understand.
- Talk to your callers, don't write to them. Scripts that sound like writing are stilted and frequently discourage callers. Always read your script aloud before recording it.

What's on the menu?

- Keep prompts short and to the point.
- Permit prompts to be overridden, where possible. And let callers know they can skip a prompt early on, not after they've listened to the entire message!
- Limit the number of choices to a maximum of four or five options per menu. Callers won't remember the first option after they've waded through seven more.
- Position the most commonly requested choices first on your menu.

Let callers feel in control

- Give callers an easy way to go back to the main menu and all submenus.
- Allow callers to repeat, pause and move forward and backward through scripts and menus, keeping keypresses consistent. For example, "0" should always get callers to an operator or customer service representative.
- Script so that all menus automatically repeat one time after no action is taken.
- Offer a demonstration or information option showing callers how the system works.

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- Always provide a way for callers to get help from a person, while at the same time encouraging them to use the system.
- Allow your callers to make a mistake - - transfer them only after they've had at least two tries.

Help callers out

- Don't have callers enter passwords or PINs and go through several levels of the system, only to be transferred to someone who knows nothing about the system or how to assist them.
- Train your employees on the system and set up special transfer-out numbers so employees know when calls are coming out of the system. Establish a transfer-in procedure so that employees can re-deposit callers into the main menu or other areas of an application. Remember that scripting and call flow design are an evolving process, and should reflect regular feedback about your applications from callers. Changes and enhancements to your caller interface will be a way of life.

Keep your callers involved

Notify customers of your new voice system before it's up and running to avoid confusion and frustration, especially if you're implementing an application with multiple menus, or one that requires callers to enter an account number or PIN. Send a postcard or other mailing with information about the system. And stagger your mailings for a smoother influx of first-time callers.

Make sure your mailing is benefit-oriented, stressing that the voice system provides callers with another channel for communicating with your organization.

Consider including the following in your mailing:

- Most frequently called extensions/departments.
- The date the voice system will be implemented.
- How calls will be answered - - main number by an operator, for example, or by an automated attendant.
- Any new number that will be answered by an automated attendant (if applicable).
- What information callers need to use the system (account number, PIN, etc.).
- A business reply card or separate number for caller feedback to help you gauge success.
- Flow diagrams of the application, wallet cards, brochures - whatever tools your caller community needs to effectively use the system, if any.

It's all in how you say it: finding the right voice

Although often overlooked or underestimated, experts believe that good voice talent is critical to the success and acceptance of a voice system. The "wrong" voice can often sabotage an otherwise good system.

Consider professional help

The voice your callers hear may be their first impression of your organization. If possible, hire professional voice talent to record your prompts, and use a single voice for all applications. And always record in a studio-like environment, allowing for as many takes as you need.

Match the voice to the audience

- Who's your audience? A voice for the financial market should sound different from one used for a community service application.
- Consider male and female voices and the characteristics of the voice. A voice for a nanny service should sound more nurturing than one for a collections department.

Will your voice be there for you?

- Will your voice talent be available for any necessary follow-up recordings? If you're thinking long-term, you might want to draw up a contract with a no-conflict clause.
- Can he or she provide 24-hour emergency turnaround?

Lend an ear

- Listen to the voice you're considering under the same conditions you'll be using: over the telephone network - and digitized, if possible.
- Carefully evaluate the quality, speed and cadence of the voice.
- Pay special attention when variable information such as dates or amounts is inserted into prompts. Numbers, months, and dates are usually recorded separately from other prompts, so make sure the tone is consistent. Test prompts that contain variable information after they're recorded to make sure they sound natural.

How to increase customer use of your voice system

The tips in these pages should start you on the road to successful implementation. Remember, callers are more likely to use a voice system if:

- They are educated about the system and what it can offer them.
- Their expectations are set, and they're prepared to be answered by an automated system, not an operator.
- There is real or perceived value in using the system - for example, it's quicker or easier than other methods.

TMIA's top ten tips for designing a caller-friendly system

1. Tell callers how they can easily reach someone "live" if they need assistance - and make sure that extension is staffed during normal business hours.
2. Limit the number of choices you offer callers in a single menu. More than four or five choices will confuse your callers. And don't force them to wade through six menus before they reach the information they need.
3. Automatically transfer callers who don't respond to initial prompts to a receptionist or operator. They may have rotary phones or may not understand the instructions.

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4. Give callers an option first, followed by instructions on what key to press to take action:
"For special gadget promotions, press 1."
5. Let callers know what keys to press to repeat menus or replay information.
6. Enlist support of upper management. TMIA research indicates that management support and use is key to a successful implementation.
7. Educate employees about voice applications so that they can be helpful to callers.
8. If callers can get better information from a customer service representative, they won't use your system. Make sure your applications offer callers the specific information they want.
9. Don't set up voice applications just so someone doesn't have to answer the phone.
10. Consider using a professional studio to record scripts, and if possible, hire professional voice talent.