

Stay ahead with a Speech Self-Service Strategy.

The Interactive Voice Response (IVR) market has been around now since the early 1980's. In its early days this was a great way for large organisations to direct callers' enquiries to the right area of the business without the need of an initial live agent, typically using dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) or keypad interaction. However, this has developed into a rather frustrating service with menu systems getting larger and more unmanageable for the caller - most users can hold a maximum of four or five options in their head before they are clouded with confusion.

Over the last five to six years the speech side of call centre IVR's has taken off, mostly driven by the improving quality of speech recognition and wider customer acceptance. This has driven the move towards a new and improved service loosely called 'self-service', which enables callers to take advantage of this particular area of technology. Speech has enabled solution suppliers to re-address the customer business requirements and strategies, replacing DTMF with a more efficient and natural call flow.

Good speech services need a well-designed voice user interface (VUI) if they are to satisfy the callers' needs and cannot use the same methodology or design concepts that are used to build DTMF applications. There is no benefit to using expensive pre-recorded celebrity voice talent, just to recreate the old DTMF menus, self-service needs to be dynamic, configurable and have the flexibility to change as specific market conditions demand – this requires a new strategy.

Consumers are largely driving the trend for easy-to-use self-service. The technology is available to give consumers the choice of waiting in caller queues or helping themselves with a self-service application. The key here is to provide choice and not push or demand the self-service option. A well-designed application will reduce waiting times, take the pressure off the demand for a live agent and ultimately result in a satisfied customer. It is important to understand that self-service will not replace the live agent interaction completely. It is an alternative option for the caller, which also provides a solution to those mundane costly services that need to be provided by the business. It offers the caller more choice and flexibility, while giving the agent more time to deal with the more challenging enquiries coming into the call centre.

Situation analysis, requirements and considerations

Before embarking on a self-service strategy an organisation should ask themselves if their current services truly deliver what is required by themselves and their customers and whether or not the services are delivering the maximum return on investment and on relationship.

With a self-service strategy it's all about looking at the services from a customer's point of view. How do they want to communicate with the business? What would make their life easier, satisfy them more and consequently boost their loyalty? Turning an organisation's strategy and mindset round can be a challenge in itself and with the merging of services, such as offshore call centres and incumbent IVR systems and the introduction of new technologies, the task can be daunting. With careful planning and the right partnerships, however, the benefits can far outweigh any pains in the form of increased customer satisfaction and retention, reduction in cost to serve and increased revenues

The perceived costs associated with building new speech services, are what have kept some companies hanging-on to the past. However, with a thorough analysis and accurate business case, it can be demonstrated that in organisations where call centre staff are dealing with repetitive, mundane calls such as balance enquiries and bill payment among many such enquiries, real savings and fast payback can be seen. Consider the fact that more and more customers expect extended hour, or even 24/7, access. To offer this service through an increase in call centre staff would require a huge increase in investment, however, a comprehensive self-service system could deliver a service for a fraction of the cost.

With all the hardware and server technology deployed for the millennium switchover many organisations hope to 'sweat' their investments for as long as they can, but now they are faced with a need to refresh this technology, providing a good opportunity to introduce a strategy to provide new self-service applications.

In assessing the potential costs associated with delivering a good self-service solution one needs to focus not only on the building or development of these applications but also the ongoing manageability and even portability of those services. An organisation would want to make sure that any investment made in building applications is not wasted by selecting new application services which would be fully portable in the future. Portability is crucial and means that an application can be used on any current or future hardware layer. An important consideration if hardware needs to be replaced or if, as a result of a merger or acquisition, different IVR platforms come onto the IT inventory. Insisting on portable applications, which require little or no additional development, could save a business future expenditure and is a point worth considering.

The ability to easily and quickly edit speech applications according to market demands is also worth noting when planning a self-service strategy. A dynamic and configurable application will not only extend the life of the application, but also give a business a competitive edge. The total costs associated with delivering full end-to-end speech self-service are split three ways, with one third of costs tied to the initial hardware and software purchased for the solution, and two thirds for the creation, building and ongoing support of the actual applications. It is best practice, therefore, that any application be portable across multiple platforms and fully configurable in order to protect the investment.

The IVR platform layer provides the basic functionality for the interfacing of inbound calls, and today software-oriented suppliers of IVR platforms are well on their way to leading the pack. Software-based solutions tend to be more versatile, are able to change with the market demands and incorporate new and upcoming technology additions quicker. In the near future there will be a radical shake up in the industry where IVR platform vendors will need to be more competitive and comply with the commoditisation of the hardware server layer, which will drive down costs.

Conclusion

A good self-service strategy can enable an organisation to stay ahead of competitors, increase customer and agent satisfaction, while reducing costs – all within a short period of time of its instigation. An organisation should be aware of vendor lock-in at any level including hardware, software and professional services, so that investments are protected now and in the future. And when investing in self-service applications it is important to ensure that it is fully configurable in order to tailor services to the callers' demands.

About Craig Ashmole:

I am a strong commercially focused individual, with more than 22 years, of European & International sales and sales leadership experience. A board level negotiator with personal hands-on experience in all aspects of creating and building new business, creating successful sales teams. As a seasoned business traveller I have an ever growing network of global business contacts. Focused at building and growing International Sales. Strong New business.

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