

Psych! ***Don't Just Send Callers*** ***to the Website***

Susan L. Hura, PhD
Principal, Speech Usability



iMessaging Systems, Inc.

We all have our pet peeves when we call into automated telephone systems: ads for stuff we don't want that you can't skip over, long legal disclaimers, or having to repeat everything once you get transferred to a live agent. I hate all of these things, but my number one top complaint is when you navigate through an IVR system only to be told 'sorry, if you want to do this you have to visit our website at w-w-w-dot....' There is nothing more infuriating to me—and to many end users—than to realize that we've played nice and used the IVR only to be rudely turned away. I recently encountered several applications that use this same pitiful technique and it made me wonder why it is so endemic to IVR interactions. In this column, I'll analyze what I think is going on here and why it is so detrimental to a positive relationship with people who call your IVR.

First let's consider the pragmatics of this situation. The user, typically a customer or potential customer, has chosen to pick up with phone to attempt to contact an organization. When their call goes through, they are confronted with an IVR that presents them with various choices via a menu. The user behaves cooperatively and provides a number of appropriate responses to reach some terminal point in the application, when he is suddenly confronted with a message that tells him 'we can't help you with that.' This has that slap-in-the-face quality for a couple of distinct reasons. First, this is Grice's Maxim of Relevance at work—cooperative speakers only say things that are relevant to the conversation, so when the IVR offers order status, for example, and then can't provide the status, it breaks one of the fundamental unwritten rules of conversation.

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The second reason behind the slap-in-the-face feeling is that 'we can't help you here,' is rightly perceived as rude. I'm not talking about the particular wording of the prompt, because in fact, many of the prompts used in this situation contain ridiculously, overly polite language. It doesn't matter how you say it, it's just rude to tell customers who have chosen to call and who have behaved cooperatively that you're not willing to help them in their chosen modality. It's a classic psych out: provide a phone number for users to dial, present them with an option, and when they choose it...psych! Fooled you, we don't do that here! I'm not suggesting that organizations are mean-spirited in directing callers to the website, but I do think we do underestimate the damage we do by turning customers away. I recently heard a user spontaneously burst in with, "I can't go online because I don't have my computer!"

So why do organizations do this? They understand at some level that they're not providing the best service but they choose to do it anyway. The arguments I hear most often are that it's too expensive to speech-enable everything we do on the web and that some functionality is a bad fit for speech. To me these are both crummy excuses that those of us in IVR-land stupidly accept. Can you imagine navigating several clicks into a website only to get to a page that tells you, 'sorry, you have to call our IVR to do that, ' and getting no other options? What we do every day in IVRs is an exact parallel.

My counter-argument is that the cost of offering some functionality via the IVR is less than the cost of lost customers. Vocalabs has data that shows that a single bad interaction with an IVR is enough to make customers willing to take their business elsewhere, and these interactions

qualify. As to the notion that not all functionality is a good fit for speech, this is true to a certain extent, but there is room for us to do more than we are. If the fit is imperfect for speech, the current strategy seems to be to throw up our hands in despair and tell people to go to the website. Let's follow the pattern set by our friends who design webpages: if you can't do it on the web, offer another mode of interaction like live chat or email. Consider these recommendations for providing better service within the IVR:

- For status lookups, if you can show it on the web, you ought to be able to read it out in the IVR. If the information is long or complex, present a summary version first, then offer details if the user wants them.
- For forms that are downloadable via the web, offer to email the form to customers if you have their email on file; otherwise, offer to fax it to them. (Collecting an email address is tough—I recommend avoiding it here.)
- Offer to email, text, or fax a printed version of any sort of status readout, instructions, or other information that users might want a hard copy of.
- If you're absolutely unable to service customers in the IVR, always offer the option to speak to an agent. Remember—they chose to call rather than go online, and probably for good reason!

I urge you all to look for creative solutions that remind customers how great it can be to use our most convenient and ubiquitous technology, the telephone, to do business with us.

Susan L. Hura, Ph.D., is founder and principal at SpeechUsability, a VUI design consultancy firm. She can be reached at susan@speechusability.com.

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