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How to Get the Most from Voice Bots

Make your human agents more efficient by automating the first steps of customer service.

By **Pam Baker** on **April 16, 2008**

It's no secret that companies use **voice bots** to deflect as many incoming calls as possible rather than to actually resolve customer issues. But this strategy is shortsighted, as any costs saved in operations are likely lost on the customer-retention side.

"Personally, I hate them [voice bots] unless they're providing a value-added service. If it's a simple replacement for hitting 1-2-3 on my keypad, then don't bother," said Paul C. Williams, senior software engineer/architect at LexisNexis. "If they're context-sensitive with relatively natural language support like Tellme or Goog411, that's fine."

The problem stems from human nature. **People like to be heard and understood** by other people — not bots — especially if they are angry.

"For most consumers, when they have a problem, feeling validated is as important as getting a resolution," said Dan Hill, owner of Suite Spot Commerce Inc.. "If a consumer feels wronged in some way, they're in contact as much to vent their frustration and hear an 'I'm sorry' as they are to get the problem solved. Bots are not very good at this, especially since the consumer knows it's not a person and it 'doesn't get' their frustration."

By allowing consumers to opt for a live person, you'll be saving a customer. Conversely, by providing better voice bots, you'll successfully deflect a good portion of the call load off of your **agents**.

"Our benchmark shows that call volumes continue to climb at an alarming rate, and companies have to invest in technology to deflect a percentage of these calls. While consistency is certainly a benefit, the **ROI** [return on investment] of call deflection receives the bulk of attention," said John Ragsdale, vice president of research at SSPA (Service & Support Professionals Association), the largest and most influential industry trade group for technology-service and -support professionals..

Maintaining an optimum mix of technology and live aid is a fine line to walk, but it is a walk that must be taken. "There are multiple layers of voice technology required to do self-service: the IVR [Interactive Voice Response]; the speech recognition and text-to-speech/speech-to text layer; and the newest and coolest layer, intelligent voice applications," said Ragsdale.

"The more accuracy and flexibility you want, the more you pay," he added. And, while that is very true, the higher costs on the front end are offset by savings and profits gained from customer and call-agent retention on the back end when frustration is truly relieved for both.

SSPA offers the following recommendations for an optimum voice-bot service:

- **Upgrade your IVR to an XML platform.** Unfortunately, many companies are still using pre-2002 IVR platforms that do not support VXML (VoiceXML). Before evaluating any new voice technologies, upgrade your current platform to the latest version so that your company can take advantage of the benefits of VXML moving forward.

- **Go with an end-to-end solution if possible.** While VXML supposedly eliminates much of the complexity of integrating voice applications, there are many intricacies in tying together the IVR platform, the speech- recognition engine and the speech-application layer. Leading vendors in each technology layer offer pre-integration with major players, and most resell technology from other vendors. Start with your existing IVR vendor and its partner network before evaluating stand-alone applications that will require custom work to fit into your business's environment.
- **Consider an on-demand solution.** Most voice-application vendors now offer their products **on-demand**. By going down this route, the pricing model changes dramatically. Your company pays only for the number of sessions — or minutes used — by customers. If customers don't adopt the technology or bail out quickly, your business's cost is low. This is a great way to get started slowly, automating just a few common problems or rolling out voice self-service in a pilot program to a limited group of customers.