

Is Your Automated Voice System Talking At Your B2B Callers Or Communicating With Them?

Voice perception is reality.



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In business-to-business direct marketing, the effectiveness of a campaign is frequently evaluated based on the number of inquiries and the quality of those inquiries. Calling into a toll-free number is the easiest and fastest way for someone interested in the product or service being offered to respond. The way the caller is handled affects both the number of inquiries, and the quality of those inquiries.

The benefit of using automated systems for answering inquiries is that the words spoken, being pre-recorded, are totally controlled. With a live conversation on the other hand, the words used by a group of agents speaking to a caller, particularly if those agents are at an independent telephone service bureau, are substantially uncontrollable, regardless of all instructions and training.

All the same, the interactive voice response machines, as they are commonly

being used, are clearly inferior to live operators in handling inquiries, adversely affecting not only the number of inquiries, but quality and accuracy of the leads generated as well. If the words provided by the machine are well thought out, clear and always the same, why are the results inferior?

The reason is that the communication to the caller includes a great deal more than the spoken words alone convey. Every politician or actor knows this.

The Words Spoken Are a Very Small Part of the Communication

Studies have shown that less than 10% of what is communicated between people is conveyed through spoken words. About a third of the communication results from the talk, but not the words themselves. Examples would include the sound of the voice, the intensity, the nervousness, the speed, the accent, whether male or female, and so forth. Importantly, more than half of the communication is conveyed neither through the meaning of the words nor through their presentation. Such non-spoken, non-verbal communications in the context of a telephone call would include background noises, the caller's perception of a call center agent and the way a call is being handled.

In print advertising there are no spoken words — only visuals and written words. Is the message contained in the written words the most important part of the ad? Generally not. The communication is contained in the graphics, the layout, and perhaps a few ambiguous key words that generally convey an incomplete thought: "The Marlboro Man"; "Vote for Experience"; "GE brings good things to life." It is part of the environment — the

non-verbal communication that the advertiser is seeking to convey. The substantive words are in small type and are most often not read. At best they are glanced at. Words, whether spoken or read, are the frosting on the communications "cake."

The famous mime, Marcel Marceau, held audiences enthralled without any spoken communication. A conductor communicates with the orchestra in a performance without using either any words or sounds.

If there remains any doubt about how proportionately little the spoken words communicate, try saying something to someone where the words are totally unambiguous, such as "I can't thank you too much." But say it with a frown and in a surly voice. The communication will not be what the words are intended to convey. The non-verbal communication (The slow speed, surly voice and frown) overwhelms the spoken words and communicates a sarcastic meaning quite opposite that which the words alone impart.

The Image the Caller has of the Other Person on the Telephone

A customer has called your call center. That caller has a perception of what the person handling the call at the call center looks like. Many advertisements are specifically designed to establish an image by showing an attractive, smiling, young woman wearing a headset. That image is abruptly shattered when a call is answered by a strongly accented male voice, clearly reading from a computer script. The caller will update his image as to the service, the call center and the company based on the sounds. The caller may ignore the words spoken. That real communication the caller has received

will never be recognized by the call center, even if the call was recorded, as is done for training and supervisory purposes.

When the agent asks the spelling of the caller's last name three times, and the caller's patience is wearing thin, the caller's image of the agent takes a turn for the worse. The caller may not even be aware of his subconscious reaction. The entirety of a communication may not be consciously recognized by either party.

When an ad shows an attractive young woman with a headset answering customer calls when there may be no such person, is this an act of deception or misrepresentation? Clearly not. This is a universal practice designed to create a warm, friendly image. It is the image that is relevant and being communicated. Billions of dollars are spent every year communicating only an image — much more than is spent communicating words.

When a call is answered by a voice mail system, "You can speak at the beep," or a caller is given a protracted selection of touch-tone menu selections, there is a very strong non-spoken communication to the caller. The clear automatic statement "Your call is important to us" can instill a negative communication, conveying the *opposite* of the clear meaning of the words. The communication received is "Your call is not important enough for us to have an operator answer and immediately direct the call to the proper party. We think you are dumb enough to believe our trite statement." The specific words contradict the communication. If you have any doubts, consider the high proportion of callers that pretend to be at a rotary phone by not keying in a touch-tone response to an automated attendant, knowing that as a default, an operator will answer.

With automation it is just as necessary to communicate an image as with agents. Some automation systems try to do this with radio announcers and background fanfare music. Others use celebrity talent for the announcements and prompts. Often the talent is the same as that used on TV advertisements used to promote the product. These voices do create images for the caller, but they are most often negative images.

The recorded radio announcer, answering a call automatically with an extended introduction, comes across as a circus barker. Remember, the caller called,

Representative Cost Per Thousand Leads

May 3, 2001 ConServIT, a service of Conversational Voice Technologies Corporation

Item	Live	IVR	Natural
Advertising Campaign	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000
Number of calls gen	100,000	100,000	100,000
Number of Leads generated	75,000	40,000	90,000
Est. Cost for handling calls	\$175,000	\$55,000	\$75,000
Total cost for campaign	\$1,175,000	\$1,055,000	\$1,075,000
Cost for handling each lead	\$2.33	\$1.38	\$0.83
Cost per lead generated	\$16	\$26	\$12
Cost to generate 100,000 leads	\$1,600,000	\$2,600,000	\$1,200,000

Assumptions:

- Live calls cost \$1.00 per minute of talk time (Including allocation of fixed charges)
- Average complete call (lead) is 2 minutes
- Average incomplete call is 1 minute
- IVR costs \$0.25 per minute plus \$0.50 for transcription of complete calls (leads)
- Natural Speech costs \$0.10 per minute plus \$0.60 for editing complete calls (leads)
- This response rate of 100,000 responses for a \$1,000,000 promotional effort is offered as an example, the results being proportionately consistent regardless.
- Total Cost for campaign excludes fulfillment and lost opportunity costs which would increase

not the other way around. The caller is calling to convey information to your center, not to hear a self-serving monologue. The caller's perception of this type of conduct, regardless of the words spoken, is often one of rudeness and arrogance. If the intended communication fails, it is not the machine that is at fault, it is how the machine was used. The same would happen if the radio announcer answered the same way, live.

What happens to all those carefully thought out scripts prepared by the B-to-B client and the ad agency, and presented to the caller at the beginning of the call?

They are spoken, but not necessarily communicated. The caller tunes out. That has been proven time and time again. The words are ignored. If you have any doubts, survey your callers shortly after they have called your automated system as to what they remember about what was said to them.

How Can a Machine Communicate with a Caller?

If the caller does not feel comfortable, the call is going nowhere and there will not be a second call for a follow-up order, except out of necessity. Ask any successful sales person and they will confirm that if the business company

prospect does not feel comfortable with the salesperson, there will be no sale. There is nothing you can do about that. That is hard wired into the human animal.

The machine, therefore, must make the caller comfortable. The first rule is don't pontificate at the caller's expense. The caller called you to convey information to you. When your machine gives a lecture, the caller has closed his ears and is just waiting until he gets his chance to convey what he has on his mind, unless the caller hangs up first. Let the caller talk. He or she called you to say something.

Imagine answering a call live and talking for thirty seconds or more before letting the caller speak. You couldn't do it. You would convey the image of being a nutcake. What is the image you convey letting machines do the very same thing?

Don't insult callers. It seems everyone using machines assumes they can impose their wishes on the caller with abandon, because the caller can't fight back. The reasoning is that the machine can control the caller. The communication is very negative. "Please speak clearly and distinctly," tells the caller he or she doesn't speak clearly or distinctly. The communication is rudeness. The clear technical meaning of the words is not

Comparison of Features of live, IVR and Natural Speech Technologies

May 3, 2001 Source: ConServIT, a service of Conversational Voice Technologies Corporation

Feature	Live	IVR with touch tone	IVR with Speech Recognition	Natural Speech
Cost	highest	lowest	medium	low
% of callers that complete calls	60%-80%	15%-50%	20%-60%	75%-95%
Accuracy	high	medium	low	very high
Acceptability to Callers (based on complaints)	high	lowest	low	highest
Free Form dialog with caller	yes	no	no	yes
Branch based on recognition of a word	yes	no	yes	no
Branch based on open ended caller response	yes	no	no	yes
Provide information based on specific words such as an account number, stock symbol, etc.	yes	yes	yes	no
Number of categories available for caller responses	high	very low	medium	very high
Standardized evaluations of subjective caller responses	no	no	no	yes
Ability to handle multiple languages and foreign calls	good	poor	fair	excellent
Turnaround time from the time of the call to conversion to a digital text computer record transmitted to client	medium	long	long	very short
Scripting based on live call handling	yes	no	no	yes

conveyed. "You can speak now." The caller can speak whenever the caller wants, and will show you, by hanging up or not listening. "Please tell me your name." You don't "tell" the caller what to do. The caller called you, and it is arrogant and presumptive for you, using a machine, to "tell" the caller what to do. You couldn't tell the caller anything if the call was answered live. You would say, "May I please have your name." In each of these few examples of machine talk, there are strong spoken, non-verbal communications that convey a rude, arrogant, insincere and presumptive image to callers.

There may still be some disbelievers. However, if you are one, please try personally using one of those machine-like expressions with a caller live. If you choke while doing it, ponder why you find it difficult.

How to Know What Your Machine is Communicating

Everyone speaks their language and believes they do so as capably as anyone. However, speech is a very specialized field, and there are very few with adequate experience as to the effect of machine driven messages. Most machines are manufactured and promoted solely to talk at callers.

Your machine, if it is to be successful, must communicate a positive. It is

destined for ultimate failure if it, and your voice program, are imposed on the caller. Callers will tune out either by hanging up, or not listening to those "very important and clearly stated" words on which you have spent time and money agonizing over, having them reviewed by management, and approved by legal. You have no control over the caller, even if you try to dictate how he must reply.

Machines using natural speech technologies communicate with callers using the same expressions live agents would use. If it can't be said live, it should not be said with a machine. That is the basic premise of natural speech technology. As a result, you create a positive image for the caller, and one that is competitive with an inquiry handled live. If properly programmed in natural speech, the negative communications generally associated with machines are avoided – even if the caller is told that the call is being handled automatically. At ConServIT, we've found that our natural speech technologies are effective in business-to-business response applications.

Yields (completed calls as a percentage of total calls), using this technology usually exceed yields obtained using live agents. The accuracy is better as well. It can be done, and is being done. The secret is to *communicate with*, rather than to *talk at* the people that have made the effort to call you.

Summary

When programming your automated system, focus on the communication, not the words that are scripted. Remember, what may be clear when written and having passed all those review committees will likely have a different communication when spoken to an unrehearsed caller. Just because it is clear to you what the written words say, don't presume those words, when spoken, convey the intended thought to the caller. You will err.

Let the caller tell you what is communicated. The biggest mistake made by firms using machines is that they prepare the message to tell something to the caller, rather than being concerned with what is communicated to the caller. Don't become one of those who start the scripting process by saying "This is what we want to tell the caller." Saying, "This is what we need from the caller" properly starts the process.

You need to communicate successfully with *all* callers, not just a selected subset. Don't expect praises for those callers where your talk was successfully communicated. Concern yourself, rather, with those callers where the communication failed (typically manifested by the caller hanging up prematurely). ■