

Is Your Automated Voice System Talking at Callers or Communicating With Them?

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Overview

The difference between what is said to telephone callers and what is communicated is not generally recognized, particularly when using automated devices. What appears fine in a written script drafted for recording outgoing prompts may communicate nothing, the reverse of what the words say, or insult the caller.

“Please speak clearly and distinctly.”
“You can speak now.”
“Say YES or NO.”

These phrases are all commonly encountered with automated systems. Yet, if you personally were handling a call, you would not feel comfortable saying any of them. Nor would management ask you to. Why is the communication the caller receives different when the same words are spoken live than when spoken by a machine? Or is the communication different? Does the listener react differently?

Communicating and Talking, Defined

What is spoken and what is communicated are not synonymous. The spoken words and the communication associated with those words can be very different. The words are transmitted by one party. The communication is what is received by a second party.

Talk is an activity of only one person, the speaker. Communication requires at least two people, a speaker and at least one listener. If a listener is hearing but not listening, *none* of the

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spoken words may be communicated. Instead, the communication may be boredom, disbelief or disinterest to the listener (which, perhaps, is why the listener was not listening).

How many times have you said to someone words to the effect "I told you that," knowing full well that you had mentioned the particular matter, and had the other person reply "You never did?" Obviously what was said did not register with the listener. It was spoken, but not communicated.

For the telephone user, it should be the communication that matters, not just the words that are spoken. The problem is that on the telephone the speaker can't see how the caller is reacting, as only a portion of the totality of the communication may be feedback.

The Words Spoken Are a Very Small Part of the Communication

The objective of speaking is to communicate a thought to the listener. But the communication includes a great deal more than the spoken words alone convey. Every politician or actor knows this. Because you are a famous writer does not mean you will excel as a speaker. Radio actors often do not succeed as television actors.

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.

Consider the radio. Like the telephone, radio uses only voice. Do you remember what the Lone Ranger looked like? When the Lone Ranger said "Hi Ho Silver" with whinnying in the background, we all envisioned a masked man galloping off on a silver horse. The image of an elderly man, in front of a microphone, wearing a short sleeved shirt, with a tape recorder playing in the background, unemotionally speaking those three famous words was not communicated. The words spoken, taken out of the context of the imagination of the listener and the background established by the radio program, make no sense. Only a small bit of the full communication is contained in the actual words. The non-verbal spoken sound — the rise in the level of the voice - communicated a great deal. The environment of the program, and prior perception conveyed to the listener which is the non-spoken, non-verbal communication, provides the bulk of the communication.

In print advertising there are no spoken words - only visuals and written words. Is the message contained

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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 words spoken may be ignored by the caller. 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

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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, 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.

As for celebrity talent, callers know that the celebrity is not handling the calls. When the celebrity says “This is Joe Famous Person,” the caller knows that is phony. That image will pervade the entire call, if the caller stays around that long. The problem is not the machine. The same thing would happen if the celebrity answered live and the caller was not convinced that Joe Famous person was on the other end of the line. If convinced, the caller would engage the celebrity in irrelevant, lengthy conversation which is not what you want to be communicated either.

What happens to all those carefully thought out scripts prepared by the 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

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follow-up order, except out of necessity. Ask any successful sales person and they will confirm that if the 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 nutcase. 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 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 use 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.

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Intuitive voice processing, such as offered by ConServIT Integrated Teleservices, communicates with callers using the same words your live agents would use. If you can't say it live, ConServIT should not be saying it with a machine. That is the basis of the intuitive voice processing technology. As a result, you create a positive image for the caller. If properly programmed, the negative communications associated with machines in general are avoided — even if you tell the caller the call is being handled by a machine. Yields (completed calls as a percentage of total calls) using this technology usually exceed that obtained by live agents. It can be done, and is done. The secret is *communicate with*, rather than *talking at* the people that are calling 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." The process is properly started by saying, "This is what we need from the caller."

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).

ConServIT Integrated Teleservices, a service of Conversational Voice Technologies Corporation, is a leading provider of advanced teleservices and database management services. For more information, contact ConServIT, 4205 Grove Avenue, Gurnee, IL 60031. Phone 847.249.5560 or e-mail sales@conservit.com.