
Tipping Point for Call Automation

With call automation now available as a Web 2.0 service, millions of businesses can improve their phone-based customer service

Several years ago at a trade show on call automation , I was impressed with what vendors were saying about call automation, known as IVR (Interactive Voice Response) – impressed that is, until I found out what it would take to get a system running for myself. The labor savings for phone-based customer service with IVR are great and the service quality for users is getting better each year, but when I heard about the time and costs associated with an IVR system, I got sticker shock.

On the one hand IVR costs about 1/6 the price of off-shore labor costs, but on the other, the minimum costs of getting IVR deployed in your company is north of \$250,000 and you have to wait about a year before the service comes on line.

These costs make sense for companies with large call volumes like cable companies, airlines, mass transit and large freight shippers, but make no sense for the millions of small to medium businesses that could benefit from call automation. Amtrak saves about \$5M in labor costs using IVR, so they love it, because they got a return on their investment in less than a year, but if your business could save \$50,000 a year with IVR, you would not even consider it, since the entry costs are too high to justify a return on your investment.

Plug & Play IVR on the Web

We are now entering the age when IVR is available, totally configured and deployed, on a web site. Phone-based customer support may well be entering a new era. Here is how it works. A customer first gets on to the Plug & Play IVR website at Metaphor (<https://metaphorivr1.com/ivr/Index.aspx>), picks one of many IVR packages that best fits their customer service needs and then within minutes to hours, they can configure and deploy the IVR solution that can service thousands of their end users. Example packages include receptionist, store locator, order status, appointment scheduling, PIN reset , change of address, prescription refill, outage notification and phone shopping, to name a few. For inbound calls, businesses get a toll free number that can be advertized to their end users. For outbound calls they can create call lists of any size and call schedules to meet their business needs.

A packaged IVR application takes all the best practices of voice user interface design and customer service knowledge and delivers a near-finished, specific customer service over the phone. The remaining 1% of the customization is to brand the welcome and goodbye voice messages, set some business values such as phone numbers and prices and then hook up the back-end to a customer data

source. Customers have the choice of either uploading CRM data to the website or configuring a web service to access data securely from their server. All packages come with thorough, real time, call reports detailing key events in each call, such as - did the user agree to pay for a purchase?

Try before You Buy and Pay as You Go

Not only can customers select, configure, deploy and test the finished IVR application for free, but when the customer is ready to deploy the solution in production, it costs 10 times less than custom IVR solutions and can be deployed in minutes to hours instead of months.

So what do you lose with this alternative? Surprisingly, the service quality is the same as for the more expensive customized solution, because it uses the same core speech recognition software that the customized solutions do.

But will the packaged speech application fill the needs of every call center? First IVR should mostly be used for automating simple and routine service requests, not high maintenance requests like tech support or buying a PC by phone. IVR can handle about 30% of all customer service requests very well. Today call centers can choose from about 55 packaged speech solutions in the industry in vertical markets ranging from travel, financial services, health care, retail, education, government to enterprise. By the end of this year, there will be hundreds of packaged speech applications. This type of coverage will meet the needs of 80-90% of businesses who can benefit from IVR.

Customize All you Want on the Web

What do customers do if none of the IVR packages exactly fit their business? Here there are 2 options: With only the skills of an administrative assistant, customers can change key prompts and the values of key business variables such as prices, interest rates, phone numbers, locations, business rule values. These take minutes to change and re-deploy. For changes or additions in the IVR call flow, customers with some engineering skills can access the core logic of the IVR application on the Web. They can edit changes on the Web , run a Web-based simulator and when satisfied, they can deploy those in minutes.

The Tipping Point

Many case studies on big companies with huge customer service call volumes like FedEx, United Airlines, Amtrak and eTrade, have proved that IVR has been ready for prime time for about a decade. Now that IVR is Web-enabled, millions of small to medium businesses can finally enjoy the same business benefits that the large companies have? At the next call automation trade show I go to, I wonder if the same custom IVR vendors I talked to before, might very well complain about how Web-enabled IVR is squeezing their sales.