



IVR BEST PRACTICES

Improving Customer Experience via the Voice Channel

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Let's face it: your customers have high expectations for an efficient experience. Unfortunately, traditional IVRs have earned a reputation for frustrating customers and, in turn, putting undue pressure on contact center agents. One negative customer experience can undermine the hard work you've put into your products and services. With proper planning and minimal effort, your IVR can become a valuable and strong element of customers' self-service journeys.

Think back to the last time you needed to quickly solve an issue you had with a product. Chances are calling the company's customer service line was one of the first options to pop up in your mind. Despite the rise of online self-service options, the telephone remains the most widely used customer service channel. If you want to provide excellent service to the 81% of American consumers who regularly use voice self-service (fig.1), improving your IVR system is a clear priority.

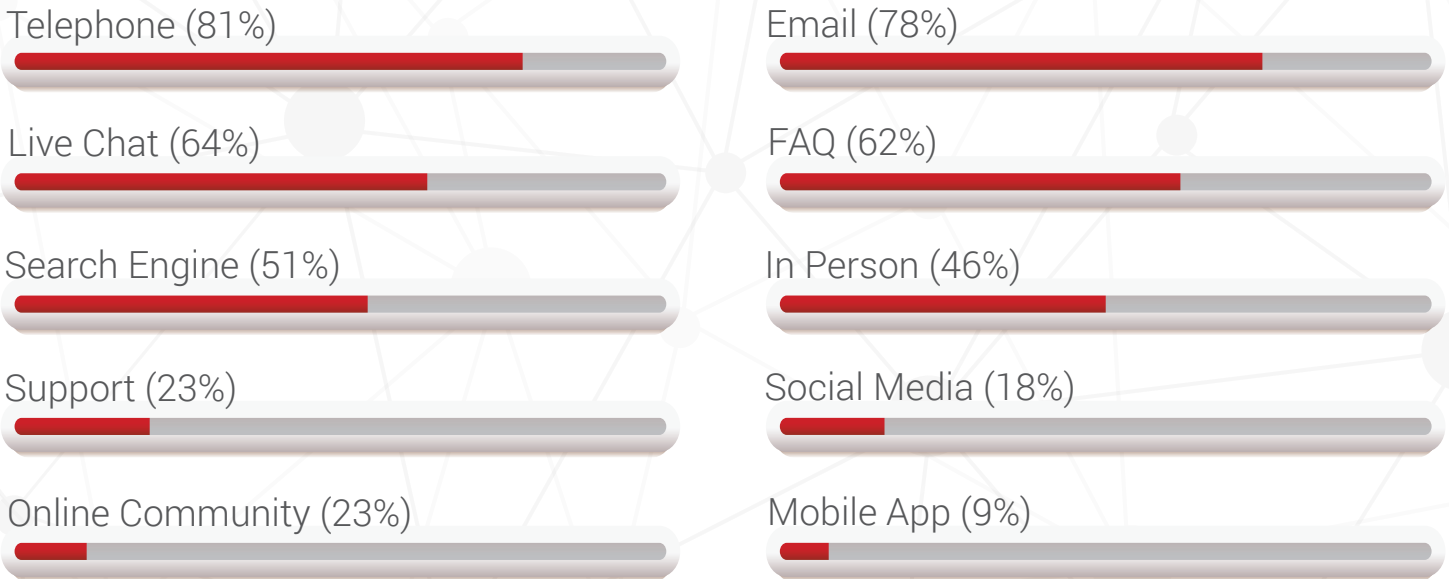


Figure 1, 2015 Parature US State of Multichannel Customer Service Report

Of course, we know that perfecting the art of the IVR is easier said than done. Customers often complain that IVRs are difficult to navigate, don't have applicable menu options, and use poor speech recognition technology that results in having to repeat responses multiple times. Not to mention, IVRs can feel like a company's attempt to keep a customer from ever reaching a human agent. These complaints are certainly valid, and can even turn a customer against your business.

Fortunately, some simple improvements can have a major impact on the performance and usability of your IVR. In this handy guide, we'll walk you through nine best practices you should consider when designing and implementing an IVR. If you already have an IVR, these principles can be applied to improve the existing platform. Following these steps from start to finish, there's no doubt that your IVR will delight customers with a uniquely effortless experience.

NUMBER ONE

PROVIDE THE OPTION TO SPEAK TO AN AGENT EARLY ON



The best case scenario for an IVR is that it successfully addresses a customer's problem on the first try. However, if the concern required a deeper level of critical thinking, empathy, or persuasion, it was likely beyond the machine's capabilities. With a more complex request, customers often face the frustrating experience of trying to reach a human agent.

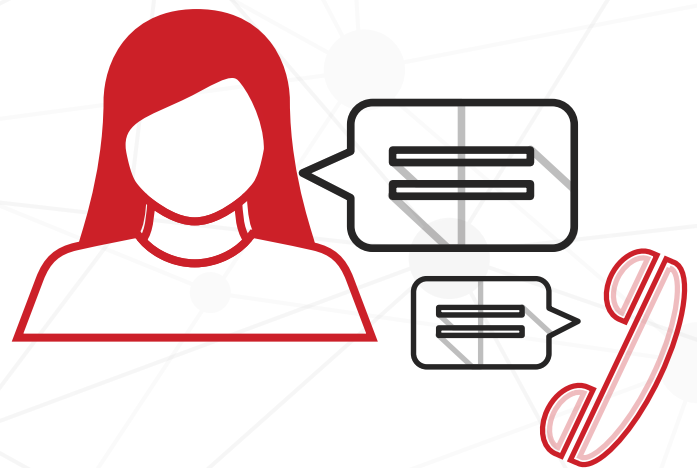
In such scenarios, customers may verbally ask for a live representative, or repeatedly press zero to try and circumvent the IVR. Many companies make the mistake of hiding the option to speak with an agent too deep in the menu – or don't offer it at all. In fact, the journey to reach a human agent can be so universally difficult that there are entire websites dedicated to shortcuts to reaching live representatives! If a customer truly wants or needs a live agent, the longer it takes for this option to be presented during a call, the longer customers have to grow dissatisfied with your company's service. Of course, considering the growing skillset of IVR systems, and business' desire to maximize efficiency on calls, this option doesn't need to be advertised on every menu. What's important is that it is available in order to prevent negative customer experiences.

NUMBER TWO

LET THE CALLER CHOOSE THEIR OWN PATH WITH OPEN-ENDED PROMPTS

Many IVRs are limited to a directed response system. This menu based system presents users with a seemingly endless list of choices that aren't always relevant. Using an IVR with natural language technology will provide open-ended prompts and allow the caller to choose a path and bypass unnecessary menu options. The caller will have more flexibility and be able to speak conversationally creating a more efficient service experience.

If using natural language recognition technology is not currently an option for you then limiting the main menu choices is a good place to start. We recommend five options or less to eliminate frustration for the caller. Better yet, using hooks into your other channels, you can even provide a timely prompt to begin a call: "Are you calling about the recent mailing we sent you?" Regardless of your



business type you can whittle down your top IVR menu to a few streamlined options that can get customers to their resolution with minimal confusion and without testing their patience.

NUMBER THREE

KEEP YOUR INTROS AND OPTION DESCRIPTIONS TO 8 SECONDS OR SHORTER

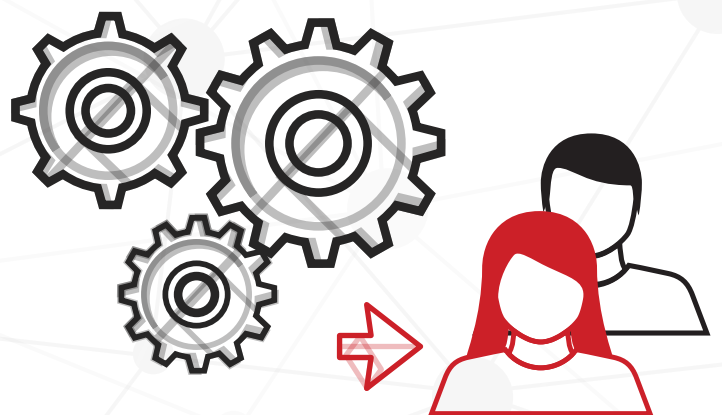


Don't get us wrong- we're all for having a clear introduction at the beginning of all customers' calls, so they know they've reached the right place. However, an overly long intro or one that incorporates useless dialogue such as telling the caller that the menu has changed can bore people and start the call off on the wrong foot. If you can put yourself in the shoes of a caller, they're seeking the most efficient and quick way to complete a task. They may be feeling frustrated or impatient, even before the call starts! Considering this, it's no surprise that using the intro to push out a marketing message can cause a negative reaction. Same goes for menu options- if a caller is forced to wait through ten options, each with a six second description, it can feel like the longest minute of their life! Oftentimes, it's such inefficiencies that can lead a customer to want to bypass the IVR and start hitting that zero button.

NUMBER FOUR

DESIGN FOR YOUR CUSTOMER'S NEEDS, NOT YOURS

In other words, make sure that the options that your IVR offers match up with the caller's needs. The best way to do this is to stray from menus altogether, like we discussed in Best Practice 2, and offer open-ended prompts to begin each call. The "how may I help you?" approach puts customers' needs at the forefront, allowing them to decide how best to direct the call. Some companies' current IVRs do not have advanced speech recognition capabilities, though, and need to use menus to help guide customers. In this case, the next question would be, "What's the best way to empower the customer to get where they need to be?" This is where customer feedback and data can come into use. By approaching your IVR design from a customer perspective, you may place menu options in different places than if you approach from a business perspective. Keep in mind that oftentimes



customers choose the first menu option simply because they think it will get them to an agent faster, so you have to consider ways to maintain correct data about the importance of each menu option to customers.

NUMBER FIVE

ALLOW BARGE-INS FOR ALL PROMPTS



In order for the IVR flow to go as smoothly and stress-free as possible, callers should be able to interrupt at almost any time. We're fortunate that IVR technology allows us to structure natural conversation flows in this way. Your customers' time is valuable and they should have the option to bypass certain prompts or intros to complete their request more efficiently. Barge-ins are also particularly important for in-line corrections – when a customer makes a

mistake on a response and quickly acts to correct the answer. If your IVR doesn't allow for interruptions, make sure that the wording used makes it clear that the caller shouldn't speak until the prompt is completed.

There are a few things to keep in mind when considering barge-ins. If the caller is in a location with a lot of background noise, this may cause some issues: the IVR may hear the background noise and treat it as a barge-in that it cannot understand, thereby repeating the phrase, "I didn't understand you." In another example, you may have customers responding too quickly and not listening to the complete question. Always take the customer into account when making a decision about barge-ins and determine if the feature will be a value-add or a frustration.

NUMBER SIX

DON'T MAKE YOUR CUSTOMERS REPEAT THEMSELVES IN MULTIPLE CHANNELS

One of the most common self-service problems is a lack of data integration across channels. Forcing your customer to repeat themselves to an agent after they've already navigated through the IVR can be incredibly frustrating. All of your company's service channels can be integrated so that at each step, the customer picks up where they left off. This provides a seamless experience, and ensures that the data stored in your company's system is consistent across the board. A seamless experience has multiple levels of benefit; your customers will have effortless conversations with your company, and your agents will be armed with excellent channel data in order to problem-solve even more effectively. Happy customers equal happy agents and vice versa.



NUMBER SEVEN

DONT HANG UP ON YOUR CUSTOMERS



Seriously? This is real? It happens more than you think, often due to a miscommunication. Considering that miscommunication can happen even between two people it's important to be cautious of disconnecting a call due to user error or non-response. While this may reduce call volume, it's a risky tactic that we advise against. Hanging up on a customer is sure to upset the caller – which is obvious – but it creates a new problem on top of the one they originally called about. Using disconnects can force the caller to dial right back into the same number, only now they're even more frustrated. Not to mention, this is time consuming not only for the customer, but also for your IVR, negating the original intent of being a viable self-service option.

NUMBER EIGHT

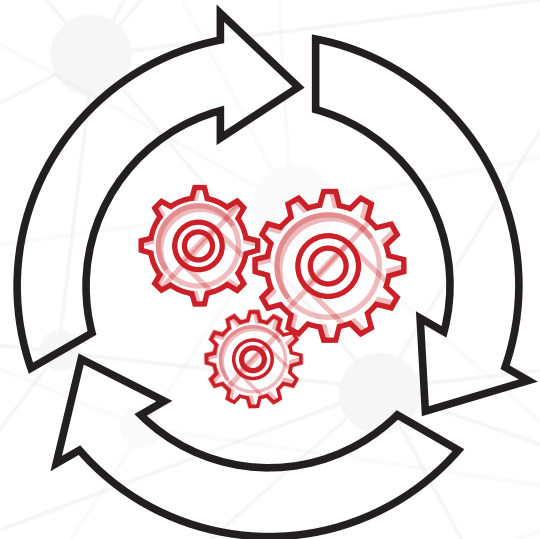
STAY ON TOP OF ONGOING TUNING EFFORTS

Lucky for us, IVR technology is constantly evolving through advanced speech recognition, artificial intelligence developments, and machine learning. With this in mind, your IVR system is far from a "one and done" deal. Tuning is a crucial component to the success of your IVR. This means that your IVR should be evaluated, at a minimum, on a monthly basis. In these evaluations, some things you should take into consideration are:

Trouble areas: Where are customers having the most trouble due to confusion or IVR errors? Where are they abandoning calls?

Demand for live agents: How often and where are your callers requesting to speak with an agent or zero out of the system?

Task completion rate (TCR): Does the TCR align with business objectives? What are areas for improvement?



With a good reporting system and proper evaluation process, your IVR can be tuned and updated to more efficiently address your customers' concerns, and create an overall improved customer experience.

NUMBER NINE

TEST YOUR IVR

While all of these best practices are important, testing is one step that really can't be overlooked. For peace of mind we recommend going live in stages. Turn on the system for a few calls, review, and revise as needed and repeat the process until you feel secure enough to turn it on fully. Before any new IVR features go live, make sure to test them with real users enacting true scenarios. When testing the IVR, enter into it with the mindset of the customer. Navigate through the system as they would and find out where the glitches are.

Some testing scenarios to consider:

Error Condition Tests: If the user hits the wrong button or responds incorrectly, what happens? Is there an error message guiding them back or do they end up disconnected or down the wrong path?

Database Access Tests: Does the IVR retrieve the proper information from all other channels and database management systems?

Voice Recording Test: Does the IVR properly save the transaction information and are the recordings being properly handled to maintain the callers' privacy and security?

System Load Test: Can the IVR scale to address more extreme call volumes than usual?

IVR Logic Test: Does the IVR allow the user to navigate the system intuitively? Can the user start over or return to previous menus if needed?

Depending on which solution you've chosen, testing may be managed differently. In some cases the vendor will manage the testing, while other times it will be handled internally by your team.



CONCLUSION

Customers choose the channel they choose based on which one they perceive to be the most effortless, but the true value of a strong voice channel extends beyond effortlessness and into overall business strategy.

With an emphasis placed on new and developing communication channels, it is so important not to forget that the phone is still the most used method for customer problem resolution. These 9 best practices ought to help you enhance your current IVR to meet ever-evolving customer expectations, leading to loyalty from customers and success in your contact center.

About SmartAction

SmartAction offers one-of-a-kind Artificial Intelligence (AI) voice self-service for businesses of all sizes. We use a cloud-based technology grounded in purpose-driven Artificial Intelligence that utilizes Natural Language speech capabilities as a means to complete self-service calls. Commonly used for providing customer service, our Intelligent Voice Automation technology allows companies to handle complex customer interactions with an intuitive, resourceful, and cognizant AI agent. In addition, SmartAction is a registered Visa and MasterCard service provider, PCI-DSS certified, and HIPAA compliant.