

THE VOICE DOES MATTER

A Brief Overview of How to Choose a Voice for Your IVR

Voice Does Matter

Perhaps you think this task is trivial, as easy as choosing Jack or Jill, but it turns out the choice is actually quite consequential. Sixty-three percent of consumers say they'll stop using a company's products if they have a bad IVR experience. As self-service rises in importance to the consumer, so does the necessity for an effective and efficient Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems. Many people will give you a detailed explanation as to how you should keep your IVR system current, but when it comes to choosing a voice for your IVR, you are left in the dark. You can fumble around a bit, listening for just the right voice before giving up and choosing at random... that sounds messy. Read on and let us tell you just how to choose a voice for your IVR.

Background

Traditionally, automated voice prompts have been done using a female voice. This supposedly dates back to World War II when female automated voices were used in airplane cockpits because they could be easily differentiated among the male pilots. Today, about 75% of IVR systems use female voices. Widespread intelligent assistants on smartphones are also generally female voices. Even though female voices are more pervasive, it is important to understand the connotations male and female voices carry in order to best equip your company.

Female vs. Male

In choosing an IVR voice, you should think about customer perceptions in addition to what they might simply prefer. When communicating with an IVR system, how consumers perceive the voice impacts their experience and communication with a company, and perhaps future actions. Perception varies widely when it comes to male and female voices.

A 2010 study asked American adults about three voice characteristics: forceful, soothing, and persuasive. All three attributes can affect how a customer feels about an automated system. When it came to judging which voices sounded more forceful, the results showed that approximately half of American adults thought a male voice sounded more forceful than a female voice, while the other half said that gender made no difference. As men are often considered more "dominant," this is a logical perception. When asked which gender sounded more soothing, approximately half of participants said females were more soothing and half said gender made no difference. Thus, while speaking on the phone with a female voice, one might feel calmer than they would when speaking with a male voice. While it is clear which voices are more soothing and which are more forceful, persuasiveness is less one-sided. Nineteen percent of people surveyed found female voices more persuasive and 18% found male voices more persuasive, but about two-thirds of the respondents believed gender made no difference. It may seem that the studies suggest gender makes no difference across the board, but there is a clear contrast at least between how people perceive forcefulness and soothing-ness. However, oftentimes the extent to which your customers trust the voice of your IVR system is the most important factor.

Who do people trust?

When customers begin a call with an IVR system (especially an outdated one), they are already expecting the worst. Often, when communicating with a traditional IVR system customers get caught in an IVR jail, unable to redirect to a live agent and forced to listen to a long list of menu options or marketing ploys. This means that

75%

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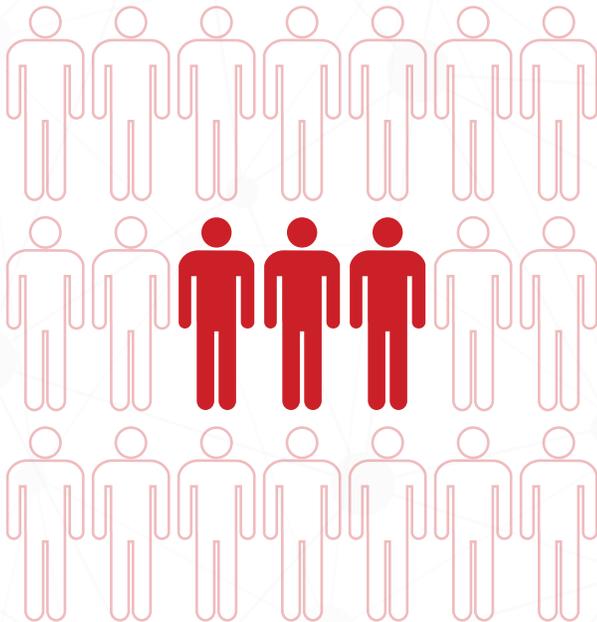


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you have little time to earn customers' trust before they request to be transferred, or worse, hang up. Studies show that people make judgements on how much they trust someone the moment the person says, "Hello." You can be sure that your IVR will undergo the same trial. The results showed that the highest-pitched, female voices were considered the most trustworthy, while the lowest-pitched male voices were considered the least trustworthy. When asked about lying, it was found that people perceived women to lie less often than men. When put into the context of a business attempting to effectively communicate with its customers and perhaps provide a service, trust becomes even more important.



When was the last time you entered a store and purchased a product from someone you did not think was genuine, or bought something online from a site that looked suspicious? The answer is hopefully never. However, when it comes to goods or services, women are more likely to research their purchases before they buy. This gives female voices even more leverage, because not only are the voices higher-pitched, but they also allude to a more informed speaker—one you can trust.



Who is your audience?

The gender of the IVR voice is only half of the equation; the gender of the consumer is the other half, and also influences the situation. Studies show that men and women prefer voices of people from their community, people they might find more relatable. In other words, it is important to use a voice that could be the voice of someone in your target demographic. If your company receives more calls from men than it does from women, it might be more sensible to have a male IVR voice and vice versa. Something to consider when examining your audience in relation to the voice you use is the listenability of the voice and the ease for the customer. For example, if your company's target demographic is older and may have difficulty maneuvering an IVR system or may have difficulty hearing, a high-pitched voice would not be the best option. Along with target demographic, the type of product or service you are offering can help you decide what IVR voice to use.

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3 Voice Options

What are you selling?

Because the gender of the consumer can illuminate what IVR voice you use, it is not surprising that the service you provide or the product you sell can also influence your decision. It has been shown that for male or gender-neutral products, the gender of the voice marketing or explaining the product does not matter, however the gender is important when it comes to female oriented products. Therefore, it seems that to err on the side of caution, you might satisfy the most customers with a female voice, unless your target demographic is overwhelmingly male.

What is your industry?

Not all companies however are attempting to sell a product or service. Some companies for example, such as financial companies, often need their IVR system to communicate with customers in order to settle balances, change account settings, and more. In this situation, the company is likely focused more on the task at hand than how the consumer perceives the IVR voice. When task completion is the top priority, it is not always best to choose the most soothing voice and perhaps lean towards the more forceful voice. As mentioned, male voices are considered more forceful, so a male voice becomes the more suitable option. In contrast, health insurance companies often attempt to convey a more soothing tone, which explains why most health insurance companies use female IVR voices, as female voices are considered more soothing than male voices. As for other industries, the use of voice varies as the product, demographic, and intent varies.

What are your voice options?

Due to the popularity and significance of IVR systems and voice automation, there exists an abundance of voices to choose from and many different companies to work with. There are three voice options you can consider: human voice talent, text-to-speech (TTS) voices, or some combination of each. These voice options have positives and negatives, but again the choice is ultimately yours. Human voice talent provides personalized speech recordings that have the benefit of sounding truly human. However, they also have the disadvantage of being less flexible. Because the voice is prerecorded, it is more common for human talent voices to use directed dialogue, which gives the customer less flexibility and can negatively affect the customer experience.

The second option is using a TTS voice. These voices do not sound like human voices-- they are more robotic sounding in order to avoid the Uncanny Valley--but offer other benefits. TTS voices provide flexibility to your IVR system that can enable it to handle dynamic data and to be quickly and easily updated. There are many TTS voice companies that offer a variety of both female and male American voices to choose from. These companies include Cepstral, NeoSpeech, Nuance, Acapela, CereProc, Diotek, IBM Watson, and more. Not only are the voices flexible with what they say, each company provides voices with different qualities, tones, and pitches, giving you many options to choose what's best for your business.

From a business perspective, you can also couple human voice talent with TTS voices for a complete experience on the phone. Human voice talent greets and converses with callers, while TTS voices handle any dynamic data that needs to be spoken or repeated back to the customer. It helps to build trust early in the call by minimizing the caller's expectation of "IVR jail," while simultaneously showing that the system is capable of completing complex tasks with dynamic data.

- 1 Voice Talent
- 2 Text-to-Speech
- 3 Combination of both

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What next?

Given the abundance of factors that influence how you choose an IVR voice, it is likely that your company can find many reasons to justify either gender. For some companies, the choice might be a given; for others it might be less obvious, but there is certainly no right or wrong voice. **As customer experience rises in importance, it is in your company's best interest to provide your customers with the most positive experience possible.** This means taking a hard look at the questions asked above and listening to a lot of different voice options. The good news is that it is not something that will make or break your company, but it certainly can make a difference.

SmartAction's Approach

We built this guide to educate our Client Support Team and found it so useful that we wanted to share it with others. We take all these factors into account and offer advice to our clients so they can make the best choice for their companies.



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