



Speech Self-Service: Discover REAL Value

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Speech Self-Service: Discover REAL Value

Speech self-service has become main-stream in contact centres as organisations are no longer placing the emphasis on technology, but rather are encouraging consumers to discover the true value of this channel.



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Executive Summary

Most consumers are already adept at using self-service channels through their experience of and the proliferation of the internet. Over time the internet has progressed from being an informational tool to being used for transactional purposes as sites became more usable and accessible to consumers. The same development path is playing out for speech self-service.

Organisations need to ensure that their automated service is highly usable and that customers can, want to, and enjoy using the Voice User Interface that they provide. Any speech self-service deployment should form part of an organisation's overall customer management strategy with 'user experience' used as a hard metric for measuring customer satisfaction.

For consumers, the real benefits of a well-designed and appropriate speech application are not only potentially lower service charges, but also an enhanced service experience.

While speech self-service can deliver benefits such as reduced agent head count and lowered costs of the interaction, its real value for the organisation lies in the ability to extend current technology platforms to enhance user experience.

For consumers, the real benefits of a well-designed and appropriate speech application are not only potentially lower service charges, but also an enhanced service experience. For example, speech self-service can mean shorter turnaround times to achieve desired call outcomes and also most easily accessible information (in most cases 24 x 7).

The key to success in deploying self-service and achieving these benefits is in providing an array of appropriate and integrated self-service options across various channels (including speech and the internet) to consumers that work and that they can use at any time, on their terms.

This paper explores commonalities between internet and speech self-service channels, strategies for successful adoption of self-service by consumers, the current levels of adoption of speech, as well as the real value of speech for organisations and consumers alike.

The Internet and Speech Self-Service Channels

Historical Parallels - Development of the Internet

Though it is hard to imagine today, with internet access common among consumers across the world (save some developing and immature markets), when the internet was first available to broader society in the early 80s, adoption of this technology by consumers was extremely slow due to the very low to non-existent levels of access.

To ensure migration to the web, organisations have often provided consumers with incentives to use this channel.

Consumer knowledge on how to utilise or even access the internet was scarce and organisations in turn did not know how to harness the technology or communicate its benefits to consumers. In the beginning, the internet was mostly used for informational purposes, and the momentum to use this technology for transactional purposes only started with increasing access levels and an organisational focus on usability and the propositions that were relevant for the technology to support. Key development points in the evolution of the internet include: (1) pervasiveness of access (consumers' ability to go online), (2) familiarity with the technology, as well as (3) improved usability (websites became user-friendly).

Consumers have a good track record of adapting to and adopting new interaction channels; their ability and propensity to accept change is well illustrated by the adoption of ATMs. When ATMs were first introduced to the market, consumers resisted using them. However, perception changed as consumers witnessed first-hand the value and benefits of this technology. Consumers became more outcome-orientated, choosing to use ATMs for many tasks they would have opted to accomplish through face-to-face interaction with a bank teller in the past.



Organisations have often been constrained in what types of interactions they can provide to consumers by technology limitations. As these limitations have fallen away or been overcome, organisations realised the advantages of using technologies (such as the ATM and the web) to extend the boundaries of their businesses and came to realise that can be cost effective to conduct business without face-to-face interaction with customers.

To ensure migration to the web, organisations have often provided consumers with incentives to use this channel by promoting the commercial benefits of using this channel. For example, a number of years ago Easyjet advertised their contact telephone numbers on their fleet of aeroplanes. Today, they advertise their web address on their aeroplanes. They lure consumers to their website with the promise of lower air fares when booking online.

Lessons Learnt from the Internet

It is useful to investigate lessons learnt from the internet when looking at the development of other self-service channels.

The real uptake of the internet only started when organisations focused on usability. Website development became more mature and focused on providing direct access to vital information, as well as enabling complex transactions, for example online travel booking.

The telephone has traditionally been an unconstrained access and communication channel, i.e. people speak to each other freely. . . . the indications are that consumers are using the voice channel for complex and emotive enquiries.

The same principle applies to other self-service channels. The relative complexity of the enquiry that organisations can handle via self-service channels depends on the maturity of the technology itself. Organisations are seldom able to support complex transactions with emerging technologies. Telephony and Dual Tone Multi Frequency (DTMF) or touch-tone technology provide good examples.

The telephone has traditionally been an unconstrained access and communication channel, i.e. people speak to each other freely. Thus, when DTMF applications were introduced to the market, consumers found it hugely frustrating to use and work within the limitations of this technology. However, when the uses to which speech self-service is being put are reviewed, the indications are that consumers are using the voice channel for complex and emotive enquiries. This is to be expected given consumer's use of the telephone as an unconstrained communication channel.



This is evident in mature markets such as Australia and the United States, where speech has already become a preferred channel and consumers have easily adopted “open dialogue” applications where they have the ability to phone and use speech technologies to interact with the organisation.

Back to the Basics in Speech

Organisations that have successfully implemented speech self-service have understood that the critical success factor is not merely the successful configuration of the technology, but more critically the users' experience of the interactions supported by the application. Organisations have realised that a key determinant of customer satisfaction is enabling consumers to complete their enquiries the first time (often achieved by reaching the correct agent the first time).

On most cases customers already have a clear "mental model" of their requirements, for example wanting a new phone or more information on a new service, further necessitating the need to design speech self-service from a user perspective.



There are a number of steps involved in designing an effective Voice User Interface (VUI):

1. Understand the target audience

The first basic step in the design of a VUI is to research an organisation's target audience. Contact centres must ensure that the interface provided by the speech application suits the demographics of the organisation's target audience.

2. Design the application to suit user needs

Contact centres need to design a speech application to suit users' wants and needs. Users are not interested in the technology behind the application, but focus instead on whether their enquiry will be resolved quickly or not.

Contact centres need to ask two key questions:

1. What do the end-users want and/or need the application to do?
2. How should the system be designed to accommodate these requirements?

3. Involve objective human language and behaviour experts

Speech is all about human communication, interaction and behaviour. It is therefore essential to involve people who approach the VUI design from an objective and informed perspective. A contact centre really needs specialists who are objective about human language and behaviour to ensure this requirement is met.

4. Use representative spoken-language

In addition, organisations need to ensure that their recorded prompts have an appropriate and representative spoken-language style, as well as realistic human prosody in terms of speed, pitch, tone, rhythm, intonation patterns, etc.

Much of the failure of many older touch-tone IVRs or earlier speech recognition systems is that they're robotic and do not mimic natural intuitive human conversation. Spoken language is far less formal than written language, and when natural human conversation is mimicked on the VUI, customers stay in their comfort zone and respond naturally.

Current State of the Speech Market

Successful Uptake of Speech in the Mobile Industry

Speech self-service has enjoyed successful adoption in the mobile service provider and telecommunication industries, principally in Australia and the United States, with some early adopters in the United Kingdom deploying self-service applications successfully. A key driver for the uptake in the telecommunications sector is the requirement to balance cost-effectiveness and differentiated value-added customer services in a highly competitive market characterised by high levels of customer churn.

To meet this requirement for differentiated yet cost-effective service, many service providers in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia provide triple play offerings (fixed line, mobile, broadband / dial up and movies). They also offer value-added features, such as customised ring tones and downloads.

One sensible strategy is to extend the core technology platform into the contact centre to offer speech self-service.



This broadening of offering and features together with the proliferation of channels has resulted in contact centres have experiencing a huge influx of inbound customer queries, necessitating the need to extend the scope of self-service channels. One sensible strategy is for mobile service providers to extend their core technology platforms into the contact centre to offer speech self-service (rather than deploying new and separate technology platforms).

In the near future, the financial services and travel and transport sectors look set to follow this trend. They will be aiming to leverage existing investments and extend their current self-service channels to be accessible via speech self-service. However, the key to success demands not a focus on speech technology, but rather a dedication to user experience and human interaction.

Market Maturity

Today's speech marketplace is crowded with vendors who have developed proven technologies, which have been widely deployed in the global contact centre marketplace. Although speech technology has been widely available to organisations for some time now, most enterprises have realised that the fault-free implementation of the technology itself will not ensure adoption by users.

The trend towards adoption of speech self-service in the United Kingdom and other developed markets is likely to follow in the steps of the Australian market, which has been an early and successful user of speech self-service. Australian organisations embarked on a huge education and communication drive to help consumers understand the value and benefits of this channel. Organisations in this market created targeted marketing campaigns to establish awareness, including advertising their speech applications externally - some even on television, and as a result have achieved positive uptake and success very quickly.

Experience simply reinforces the dictum that when designing a speech self-service application, organisations should think first about their target audiences.

In the past few years, contact centres in mature, high cost locations, such as the United Kingdom, have investigated every operational lever available to them to decrease the costs of customer services including workforce management, call recording, out-sourcing, home-shoring, and off-shoring. In many cases, what they failed to predict, is the highly sensitised nature of the telephony channel, which is often characterised by emotional and negative consumer reaction to poor customer service. (One has but to look at the impact caused by Paul English and his "GetHuman" campaign and the backlash against off-shoring for examples of consumer militancy regarding the telephony channel).

A clear illustration of this phenomenon is provided by the advent of offshoring: when contact centres started off-shoring their operations, there was a perception created that off-shored operations would offer a degraded level of customer service. The reality is more likely to have been that when these contact centres off-shored their operations, they failed to go back to the basics – to put the user experience at the core of their operations and hence delivered a poor customer service.



The offshoring experience simply reinforces the dictum that when designing any customer interaction, and particularly a speech self-service application, organisations should think first about their target audiences. The back-to-basics principles apply: speech self-service is not about technology, but about the human interaction.

Organisations need to ensure that their automated service is usable and that customers can use, want to use, and enjoy using the VUI. If organisations do not place importance on designing the speech application to suit their customers' needs, they're most probably not going to achieve the business benefits they're hoping for.

The Real Value of Speech Self-Service

Contact centres that have the ability to offer a consistent level of service across all channels whilst focusing on the outcome of the interaction will always have satisfied customers. Generally, customers in mature markets do not have a preference for a specific channel, as long as they are provided with the appropriate information, the first time. Speech self-service is no different.

Among the potential benefits of speech self-service are lower interaction costs. It is estimated that well-automated speech interactions can cost as little as only 15% of the costs of interacting with a live agent.

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However, although speech self-service can reduce the cost of interaction, the real benefit for organisations lies in the fact that they can extend their core technology platform to enhance the experience of their customers. The value of this is can be quite considerable, amounting to thousands (if not millions) saved in providing service access from existing investment rather than building out additional contact centre capacity.

For consumers, the real benefit of a well-designed and appropriate speech application is not only lower services costs, but also enhanced experience including shorter turnaround times, simpler call flows and processes, easier and better access, and consistency in service.



Conclusion

The real value of speech, and self-service channels in general, lies not in the fact that agent head count can be reduced or that interaction costs can be lowered, but that it enables organisations to leverage current technology platforms to enhance the user experience and deliver commercial benefit to the organisation.

Speech self-service needs to be part of the organisations' overall customer management strategy - it cannot be treated as a separate initiative. Organisations should have visibility across all channels and strive to provide a consistent user experience. The same principle applies to speech self-service.

Educating customers in the use of new technologies is key. Contact centres need to assess how customers are interacting with them today, what the impact of this is on the organisation commercially and how they can interact with the customer more effectively to provide the levels of service that they are required to deliver. Once organisations have access to this information, they may be surprised at the possibilities available to them to automate and how much self-service their customers are able to accommodate.

Speech self-service provides big wins for customers too. It can extend their ability to gain direct access to an organisation's products and services. And with a selection of channels available and appropriate to the interaction needs, customer satisfaction is almost guaranteed.



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