

Some Don'ts for IVR Systems

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1 Exist

How much do you hate your customers?

The purpose of this article is to try to reduce the pain that interactive voice response (IVR) systems inflict upon the humans. IVR systems, or *Customer Alienation Systems*, as Herb Edelstein, of Two Crows Consulting¹ calls them, are those automated telephone answering systems beloved of banks, utilities, and other companies, that lead us through a tree of menus “in order to help [them] to assist [us] more quickly”.

There are many stated justifications for using IVR systems, the bulk of which focus the (legitimate) desire for businesses to reduce costs, and the more tendentious of which sometimes go as far as to claim actual benefits for customers.

There is no disguising the fact that the starting point for this author is that IVR systems are the problem, and that ideal solution is to replace them with a system based on a more sophisticated components known as *human beings*.²

So the first “don't” for IVR systems is *exist*; get this one right and you can ignore the rest of the article.

2 Service the Wrong Number

“I'm afraid you've come through to the wrong number, Sir.”

Some problems with IVR start before the customer arrives. One of these is to sit behind so-called “non-geographic” telephone numbers (0845, 0870 etc. in the UK), as increasingly these are some of the most expensive numbers for people to call; obviously, the pain of languishing in IVR hell is heightened by knowing that the experience is costing you an arm and a leg.

The other sense in which an IVR system can sit behind the wrong phone number is for its number to be given out in inappropriate contexts. The most egregious such error arises when calling the most prominent number on a letter, email or website takes you through to a system that isn't suitable for calls directly related to the matter on said letter, email or website.

3 Waste Time

Welcome to The Scientific Marketer (“the world's most cantankerous marketing website”) and THANK YOU for calling. The Scientific Marketer always remembers that YOU have a CHOICE and could just as easily get your marketing advice elsewhere. Please listen carefully to ALL of the following options before making your selection and please note that menus have changed.

¹<http://www.twocrows.com/>

²with IVR system acting possibly as a backup to deal with rare cases of genuinely “exceptional call volumes”.

4 Lie

"Your call is important to us."

Yes, we've installed a customer alienation system, which might unwittingly give the impression that we care nothing about your time and aren't prepared to offer you the access to a human being you crave without first putting you through confusing and labyrinthine menus and indeterminate waits, and generally trying to get you off the phone before an operator becomes available, but—contrary to all evidence—*your call is important to us.*

"We are currently experiencing unusually high call volumes."

Unusual. *a.* 1582. Not often occurring or observed, different from what is usual; out of the common, remarkable, exceptional.

— The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

Tornados in England are unusual; several customers calling a call centre at lunchtime is not unusual.

"Did you know that we have a dedicated easy-to-use website at double-u double-u double-u dot sci-en-ti-fic-mar-ke-t-er dot com that allows you to do nearly everything that you can do at the call centre with no queuing and no outrageous non-geographic telephone charges? At the Scientific Marketer website you can read articles, leave comments, read others user's comments, report problems, learn how administer control groups, book an expert one-to-one consultation with our high trained expert marketing professional—in fact, almost all the things you'd expect to be able to do at a website (Microsoft Internet Explorer 6.0 or Netscape Navigator 4.1 required)."

People who have current web access and like using the web have already tried that; people braving IVR hell either don't use the web, don't have access to the web at this time, don't want to do this particular transaction

on the web or have already tried and failed on the web. One of the few things more annoying than failing to achieve something on the web is sitting in IVR hell for a while, giving up and going back and trying it on the web one more time, discovering that (as you thought) it doesn't work on the web, and then going back into IVR hell *at the back of the queue*, only to be lectured on how much better life could be on the web.

5 Run Security Checks too Early

"I just need to know whether your call centre will be open on Sunday."

It's alright. You can tell me that. Even if I don't know my PIN.

6 Forget

"Now, could I just begin by taking a few security details from you."

"But I just spent the first half of my morning telling your computer those exact same things."

"Ah yes, Sir, but we don't have access to that system here. Now, if you could just tell me the name of your great grandmother's first boyfriend..."

7 Deafen Your Customers

"Don't Keep Me Hanging on the Telephone."

— Blondie.

There is a problem with cavernous silence on a telephone line; customers tend to think that they've been cut off. It used to be that the solution to this was to present comfort tones—a soft beep, every few seconds, just to let the customer know that (s)he hasn't been cut off. Unfortunately, comfort tones become annoying fairly quickly and suggest to a minority of customers that they have been cut off. So it is now more common to play music at them.

There are several problems with this. One is volume, which commonly seems significantly above “comfortable”. Another is the paradox of selection: you want neither something people dislike (obviously) nor something they like (less obviously) because there is no such thing as music that sounds reasonable over a tinny, distorted, noisy phone line, and people especially don't want music they actually like murdered in this way. So the music is wrong for most people most of the time.

There is no solution based on making a better choice.³ The only solution is to avoid making customers dangle on phone lines.

8 Keep Customers in the Dark

“There are 5 customers ahead of you in the queue.”

“Most calls at your current position in the queue are answered within 5 minutes.”

There is no excuse for leaving customers in the dark about how long they are likely to have to wait. Allowing them to see their progression along the queue, and giving them the best possible information about how much longer they are likely to have to wait is extremely helpful.

The goal, of course, is to underpromise and over-deliver: people rarely complain about a call being answered sooner than an estimate. I've worded the second piece of information quite carefully: “most calls from your current position in the queue are answered within 5 minutes”. The trick here is that you can be accurate (which is important) but also conservative. Interpret “most” not optimistically (at just over 50 per cent) but pessimistically (say at 90% or 95%). You don't want to be so pessimistic that you drive people away needlessly⁴, but you do want to deliver on your promise in the vast bulk of cases.

³or worse, putting the customer into a new IVR menu to select music

⁴No, you really don't...

9 Put Your Customers on Hold

“I'm just going to have to put you on hold for a second, Sir”

No doubt there are times when customers absolutely have to be put on hold. Try to design these out. Customers hate it. Calls get mysteriously dropped by the system. Customers give up. They get subjected to more muzak. They get more frustrated.

Recognize that having to put a customer on hold is a failure.

10 Drop Your Customers Calls

⟨disconnected tone, usually after long wait⟩

I've personally never been sure whether random disconnection is an approach to call volume management or simply a sign of low-quality systems; however, calls to call centres do seem to get dropped more than almost any other kind of (non-mobile) call.

11 Exploit Queuing Users

“Did you know about the range of great marketing advice freely available from the Scientific Marketer? For substantially less than the cost of a mailshot we could advise you not to bother. Or why not check out our great range of white papers on retention, freely available at double-u double-u double-u dot sci-en-tific-mar-ket-er dot com forward-slash retentionWhitePapers dot html (remember to use a capital W in White and capital P in Papers; registration required.⁵) Do you really understand...?”

⁵In reality, of course, registration is *not* required for papers from The Scientific Marketer.

12 Use Voice Recognition

"I'm now going to ask you to answer a few simple questions. Please answer by speaking in your normal voice. For example, if your name is Nick Radcliffe, please say 'Nick Radcliffe', in your normal voice, at your normal speed, without touching your telephone keypad. Now, please state your join date in the form day, month, year. <pause> Please speak after the tone. <pause> <beep>

"Thirty March Two Thousand and Four,"

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that. Please answer by speaking in your normal voice at your normal speed, without touching your telephone keypad. Now, please try again. State your join date in the form day, month, year. <pause> Please speak after the tone. <pause> <beep>

"Thirty March Two Thousand and Four."

"I think you said <pause> Thirteenth March Two Thousand and Four. <pause> If that is correct, please say 'yes'. If that is incorrect, please say 'no'. <pause> Please speak after the tone. <pause> <beep>

<Sound of customer pulling out fingernails.>

One day, voice recognition systems might be able to understand human speech significantly better than other human beings.⁶

Today is not that day.

⁶They will have to be much better than human beings to compensate for all the ways in which they are worse.

13 Use Hierarchies or Dead Ends

If you are calling to congratulate the Scientific Marketer on its new IVR system, press one. If you are calling to tell the Scientific Marketer that you love its new IVR system more than life itself, press two. Please make your selection now.

Not all calls fit into your predefined menu structure. Given a choice between A, B, C and D, some customers will call about A and B, and some will call about E. (Unless D is "anything else", E *always* exists.) So the first labyrinth problem is dead ends: you have to cater for the user who doesn't fit your categories neatly.

The usual fallback is to add *for all other enquiries, press 5*. In the context of IVR systems, this is good practice, provided that 5 directs the caller to a human. The bad dream turns into a nightmare when pressing 5 takes the user to another menu.

IVR menus *bad*. Hierarchical IVR menus, *doubleplus-bad*.