



# Smart dialogue

BY DAVID MAIDA

**Every contact centre manager knows that first impressions count, but installing a system that connects the caller to the agent without delay can be problematic. David Maida went looking for solutions.**

Designing an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system is a daunting task at the best of times. So it might be comforting to know that even some of the largest players in the market admit that an effective solution has so far escaped them.

Cindy Wild, service line manager for Telecom's gen-i, says the limited hierarchy in the company's 1-2-3 system fails to expose all of Telecom's products and services.

"The existing system is a touchtone IVR system and no, it doesn't work effectively. And it doesn't work effectively because our business has become more complex and therefore we cannot address all the different types of enquiries in a layered menu structure," says Wild.

"The breadth of enquiry that a customer calls our call centre with today does not equate to an IVR menu. So, invariably customers coming through IVRs end up in the wrong places."

Telecom is trying to eliminate the 'push one' option altogether by moving to a second-generation speech recognition system. The current system uses voice prompts to ask the customer which service they would like, much like a push-button system. What Telecom is attempting to implement is an open dialogue smart system which would merely ask: 'What can I help you with today?'

Wild says the computer will recognise what the customer is asking even if the customer does not speak Telecom jargon.

“In Telecom’s situation, what we’re looking to do and how we’re looking to deploy it is around giving our customers the ability to have a conversation when they first talk to Telecom and getting them to the right customer services representative.”

Routing customer calls is the big challenge. Telecom customers can queue for 10 minutes or more waiting for an operator. But gen-i business manager for contact centres Ingrid Cronin-Knight denies there is a lack of Telecom operators to answer the phone.

“Even if you had an unlimited number of operators, you would still be limited in terms of how you could route that person to the right agent with the skill set to be able to deal with that enquiry.”

Cronin-Knight insists that the new speech recognition system is about routing calls properly and not saving money on staff.

“Part of the call time at the moment is because we’re actually having a bunch of internal transfers resulting from the fact the customer is getting lost in the IVR system.”

Telecom is not the only company with customers becoming lost in its IVR system. One of the last areas where you would want any additional frustration is in dealing with the tax man. Andrew Devlin, Inland Revenue’s strategic design manager of call management, says the IRD expects around 1.5 million IVR calls this year.

“Tax agents, for instance, love IVRs for particular processes, particularly those that are high-volume and where 24/7 access is useful.”

The IRD is looking to improve the system by installing a second-generation speech recognition system - just say ‘GST’ for example, and you’re routed to

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the right place. The Department is also considering an initiative where customers waiting in a queue can be identified.

“We’d like them to be able to say who they are and speak their IRD number, password, et cetera so that when they reach the CSR they are already fully verified and can start straight into the reason for their call.”

Another system on the IRD’s radar is new technology from overseas called biometric technology, which identifies callers by analysing their speech patterns.

At PSIS the IVR system also has to be secure. But for David Murray, general manager marketing and products, it’s the stability of the system which is as important as anything.

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“It’s a lot more convenient for a lot of people to be able to do things over the telephone. If you’re walking down the street you can do it for example without having to be logged on to a PC somewhere. Firstly it’s secure and secondly it’s available when you want it.”

PSIS has an unusual menu structure which requires customers to use two-digit codes to access menu options. But Murray says it works well.

“It allows us to have more than 10 options. Those developmental decisions were made some time ago in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s.”

The two-button system enables customers to interrupt the menu at any time with quick access keys. But if they don’t already know the codes, they have to wait for them to be read out.

“If you wanted a balance for example, you’d punch in 11. If you wanted to make a payment from your account you’d punch in another code which is 14. You certainly wouldn’t be sitting there waiting for however many codes there are to be read back to you, but you could if you wanted to.”

Optimal Usability has done some research into IVR systems. Co-director Sam Ng says they are inherently very difficult to implement effectively.

“One of the key challenges of course with a system like IVR is that it’s a very singular medium. It’s very linear as well. It’s not like looking at a screen and from there we’ve got almost an infinite degree of freedom to communicate with the viewer. But when it comes to voice, we’re very much limited in what we can process at one time.”

Ng says an IVR system should be able to recognise what callers want and provide it straight away.

“I think we just all naturally have a tendency to hate these systems. People typically come here to do two or three things and because we respect that they would rather be doing something else let’s not hide those things and promote them to the top.”

When these systems are not set up correctly it merely adds to the frustration that callers face. Little things such as letting the caller know what is going on or how long the queue time is can reduce people’s anxieties and give them a sense of progress, Ng says.

Sue Hartley, business development consultant for TelstraClear’s Sytec, is responsible for customising the design and development of call routing systems.

One of her top tips to companies is to ask if the budget supports the vision.

The Sytec division of TelstraClear offers a range of options for call routing. The simplest is available as a leased service for \$70 per month.

“It’s fantastic for customers because they don’t have to have any equipment on their own location. It’s all housed here at TelstraClear.”

The customer purchases licences and ports and TelstraClear is responsible for all the maintenance.

“If a company buys a TelstraClear solution off the network, that takes away any upgrade issues and future-proofing as we do all of that as part of the service.”

At the top end of the scale are complex speech-recognition applications which sit on top of TelstraClear’s network platform and cost thousands of dollars per month.

“Larger customers sometimes require a network-based IVR system on their premises. Some people like to have the actual equipment on site and manage it themselves.”

Hartley warns companies to check the costs of connectivity and support before deciding on a system. Careful consideration can then be paid to designing the menu structure.

“When you actually design a menu there are lots of bits being diverted everywhere. You have to make it logical for the customer. At each point in an IVR system where there is an option to go off somewhere, you’ve got to make sure the customer is directed to the right place.”

The structure of the IVR should be constantly monitored to make sure all information is up to date and it reflects any changes within the company. Regular customer surveys should provide feedback on their experiences with the IVR, Hartley says.

“Always keep your menu options specific, simple, and effective. Aim for four or fewer options at each level. Ensure the options relate to your customer’s needs. Avoid multiple options in one menu item.”

The IVR system should only use one voice and preferably a local one.

The use of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) allows calls to be distributed securely and effectively at less cost. And some calls can be dealt with entirely within the IVR system such as simple account balance enquiries. IVRs can also deliver comprehensive reporting on how calls are handled and which calls are routed to which exit points. Smart systems will direct a customer’s information to the agent handling that call.

“When the call eventually comes to an agent from the IVR, is there going to be a screen pop up showing the agent who the customer is? Do they also need some information about where the customer has been in the IVR?”

Hartley says that as voice recognition becomes more advanced, pioneering companies are utilising the second-generation open-dialogue system.

“Open dialogue allows the client to get through to particular directed menu points quite quickly without a whole heap of questions.”

This technology promises to route calls with fewer questions or menu items than ever before. But, depending on the success of the implementation, the customer experience will no doubt be either significantly improved - or made much worse. ■

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