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**Reasons to Automate Customer  
Service Functions to Self-service**



Most likely you have seen the television commercial where the customer walks into a drycleaner store and there is no one there to wait on them. They find a blender on the counter and a voice over says, “no one likes

to talk with a machine.” Although this is a humorous segment, it isn’t an actual representation of a good self-service customer service functions. That blender isn’t interactive and does not contain the features and characteristics that a quality self-service application requires to assist with client’s needs. The commercial plays on the myth that a client would always rather talk to a live phone support representative rather than a machine. While that may be true in some situations, it isn’t always the case and this month’s newsletter will examine how your customer service applications may be improved with automation.

A number of years ago I was calling upon a very large retail store chain that sold appliances. This company had over 80 stores in multiple states. Now, I don’t have to

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tell you how competitive this type of vertical market is. The company was looking for a way to reduce the cost of customer service and they were looking at our using our VRU to address some of their clients’ interaction through a self-service IVR application. There were two primary functions they wanted do. First, they wanted to provide the customers with the ability to call in and find out or change the schedule of a delivery. Secondly, they wanted the ability for a customer to call in regarding depot repair to see if an item dropped off for repair is finished. Of course, they wanted to provide this functionality on a 24/7 basis. We were in a conference room discussing this very





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straightforward application. They had an IBM AS400 which contained both the delivery scheduling and the database for the depot repairs so it was going to be an easy task to create the IVR applications. All of a sudden, one of this firm's associates in the room stated, "This won't work, our customers don't want to talk with a machine....they expect to talk with a live representative." This was the head of customer service talking so I had some questions for her to identify why she felt this way.....

Question 1, How many calls do you handle in a day....She didn't know.

Question 2, What is the length of those calls....she didn't know but explained that the callers would be really mad at the live customer service representative once they were connected.

This lead me to ask Question 3, What amount of time does a caller stay be on hold before they got to a live representative....She said on Monday's it was really bad and a caller could be on hold forty minutes before they reach a live representative.

At this point we discussed that they were providing poor customer service and reaching the area where the corporate image was being tarnished. The next points I made, "If all the customer wants to do is find out when the delivery is scheduled, and if they couldn't make that appointment wouldn't your delivery department like to be told so they don't load that refrigerator onto the truck, make a delivery attempt, then have to bring it back to the warehouse? Or how about the guy at work that just wants to call to see if the repair on his VHS recorder is done because he would like to pick it up on the way home. Of course, he would also like to know the hours the depot repair department is open and the final cost of the repair. I realize this topic is a little dated but that just shows how long ago this meeting took place.

Our firm even provided a free demo unit for

this firm to develop and test the application but this appliance retailer went broke after 50 years in business before they could implement their self-service solution.

### We had some primary goals at this firm.

1. Reduce cost in providing customer service functions
2. Allow users to obtain information 24/7 even beyond normal office hours
3. Filter off routine calls to be handled by the self-service IVR application therefore only using live representatives to address calls that require more advanced customer service interaction
4. Shorten the hold times of all callers

Obviously a machine providing a self-service function needs to be responsive to the needs of the customer and that is why the blender commercial is not an accurate comparison. Airports have gone to self-service kiosk machines as a way to process customers fast and efficiently. Banks have used IVR solutions for years as they make it easy for a non-sophisticated user to gain access to their account information at a low cost and without any equipment required for the user other than a standard phone. Bottom-line, there is now a much greater acceptance of that "Talking to a Machine" from users.





Vision Voice Vantage, Inc.  
1938 Zollinger Road  
Columbus, Ohio 43221

Phone: 888-252-2555  
Email sales@ODTVision.com



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## Additional Reasons for Self-service Machines

I was meeting with a city government account where they had our VRU doing an IVR application for utility billing. Their customers could call in, check on account balances and make payments. All straightforward transactional inquiry and payment type functions. This account was looking for a way for customers to report outages after hours. This city has an IBM AS400 that was on a backup generator so even if electrical service for the city area was lost, their data and our unit was operational. I was in front of the room at a white board laying out the nature of the application.

1. The customer would call into our unit
2. Upon connection, if the unit would identify the CallerID and search the database to locate the proper record profile
3. If the unit didn't recognize the CallerID, it requested the caller to identify their account through the associated home phone number tied to the account
4. Once the proper account screen was found, the application looked for the zone that that account was in
5. At this point, the unit would see if the outage had been reported for this zone & if it had....tell the caller that the outage had been reported followed by logging the call.

6. If the outage had not been reported, the application asked some simple questions. (Are the street lights on? Do you see lights at any of your neighbor's houses?) followed by the logging of the call and placing a request to service personnel identifying an outage in this zone.
7. The service personnel also had what we refer to as a back door where once in the field and where they have identified the nature of the problem and calculated the amount of time to fix it, they could assign a time for completion of the incident to the database where if any new caller calls in requesting information regarding their outage they would hear..."An outage in your area has been reported and the estimated time for repair is 1:30 AM.

Now this is the secret of not creating an IVR application like the blender...any self-service application needs to be responsive to what the application needs to accomplish for the customer. A funny side story to this meeting, one of the city's associates stated "that providing this self-service solution though an IVR application was not modern and why didn't they do it through the web"....(this was a few years ago



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Vision Voice Vantage, Inc.  
1938 Zollinger Road  
Columbus, Ohio 43221

Phone: 888-252-2555  
Email sales@ODTVision.com



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before web on smart phones was possible) ...where I replied, "I don't know....isn't the electricity out at the customer house,...how are they going to perform this task through the internet?." The associate was pretty red-faced but your self-service application needs to address the needs of the user at the time of the usage. Cellular phone usage has significantly increased the need for an IVR solution as users want information at any time and from anywhere.

### Improvements for Customer Service

We have already talked about providing customer service 24/7 and handling more concurrent calls without the need for additional personnel. One of the more recent challenges in customer service is the need to provide self-service for the non-English speaking user. Perhaps your firm doesn't have staff that can handle a caller who speaks other languages or you want to reduce the number of calls that require staff intervention. A good IVR solution allows you to offer a selection of languages appropriate for all of your users.

By increasing the number of concurrent calls that a customer service department can handle, customers will have shorter on-hold times. In addition, callers can call at non-peak times that may be more convenient for them.

Through the ability to automatically identify the caller through CallerID and the retrieval of account information from the record, the call will be

shorter in length and will require fewer questions of the user. You can also build into the record certain caller preferences and even further reduce the number of questions asked. Finally, the caller's activity can be logged and used for future reference of who did what and when.

### Ways to Improve Your Self-Service Attendant

- The number one design rule of a good self-service application is to allow transfers to a live representative if the office is open. Some callers may need assistance beyond what you provide in your self service solution
- Shorten the steps required in the application. If we can identify the caller by CallerID, you don't have to ask the caller who they are. If you can pull information from the record of that user, you don't have to ask a question regarding that information. If you already asked the caller something during the call, don't ask them that again.
- Optimize voice menus so that the most frequently used function of the system is the first thing asked
- Allow voice prompts to stop once a user enters any key and make them short, consistent and in the vocabulary a user expects
- Adjust the flow of your logic based on information found or provided
- Automatically give information that the user may need such as account balance and bill due date to shorten the call

With a little effort, you can make sure your IVR solution does not become a blender. ■