



A Digium® Guide

Why is an IVR Important?

*Using Interactive Voice Recognition
Can Improve Customer Experience and
Drive Business Growth*

Empowering Communication





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Why is an IVR Important?

*How Automated Phone Answering
Helps Your Business*

Did you know the way you answer phone calls to your business could be driving away customers?

According to *Marketing Land**, one study found that 74 percent of people were inclined to choose a competitor after a negative phone experience. And the first (perhaps most important) step to any phone experience is the way the phone call is answered.

That means a bad initial phone interaction — long hold times, not being able to get through to the right person, overall lack of professionalism when answering and routing calls — could do much more damage to your business than you might realize.

But how can you improve the way you answer your phone in order to retain customers and drive business?

Well, the first step is to start using a good automated phone system.

The best type of automated answering system on the market today is an Interactive Voice Response system — or IVR for short — and having a good IVR can do wonders for your business.

IVRs are advanced phone auto attendants that can perform basic tasks such as refilling prescriptions, taking payments, surveying callers, and fielding answers to yes/no questions without requiring the time of your team members.

Although IVRs are great, they can still cause frustration and drive away customers when not used properly. So here's how to use an automated answering service (like an IVR) to retain customers and grow your business.

* **Source:** <https://marketingland.com/report-bad-phone-experience-will-send-74-percent-of-consumers-to-a-competitor-151774>

Five Common Mistakes to Avoid So You Don't Drive Customers Away With Your IVR

If your business already has an automated answering service, or you've determined that your business needs an automated answering service such as an IVR, it's time to look at how to make that answering service as caller-friendly as possible so you don't lose customers or cause frustration.

1. Don't offer too many choices

People don't like being overwhelmed, and they're typically in a rush when they call. Giving callers lots of options might seem necessary or even convenient to you, but in reality it only adds frustration.

Another common problem is having too many "levels" of options. Again, it may seem like you're being helpful by using your automated IVR to learn exactly why someone is calling, but it only fatigues the caller and makes them want to hang up.

Do this instead:

Keep it simple. Try to keep your menu to no more than 3-5 items. Any more than that and callers will start to feel lost and confused.

2. Don't make it difficult to speak with a human

One of the most common complaints people have when it comes to IVRs and automated answering services in general is how difficult it is to speak with an actual human being. After all, sometimes calls have actual issues that only a human can understand.

Do this instead:

Take that complaint off the table by **offering a way to quickly and easily get in touch with a representative right away.** Don't make them wade through lists of options to find it.





3. Don't use cookie-cutter prompts

Many businesses get caught in the trap of being bland and mediocre when it comes to their automated prompts for their IVR. Using boring old voice prompts that every other business uses isn't going to win your brand any points in the minds of your callers.

Do this instead:

Remember the IVR is branding your company. Your IVR is your company's (and your brand's) first impression, so make it a good one. Avoid bland, boring, or confusing language, and make sure you're using a voice that your customers can relate to and trust.



4. Don't try to do too much with an IVR

Don't try to get too much information out of your caller before getting them through to the appropriate place. Remember, the simpler (and less information you ask from them) the better.

Do this instead:

Be sure you're not over complicating your IVR by asking for too much information from the caller. **Only get the most pertinent information** as to not lose the caller, and when in doubt, go back to point #1: **keep it simple.**

5. Don't forget to ask for feedback

One thing many businesses don't do enough is ask their customers what they think. How will you know which aspects of your IVR are helping or hurting your business without actually asking customers?

Do this instead:

Devise a plan to have your team **ask callers for feedback on your new IVR system.** It can be a survey or a simple, "What did you think of our answering system?"

Now that you know a few common mistakes to avoid when it comes to answering calls to your business, let's look at some rules you can stick to that will help you improve your business' automated answering service (or IVR), improve customer satisfaction, and grow your business.





Allison Smith, the Voice of Asterisk

To go over a few rules for a creating a successful IVR, we've partnered with IVR expert and voice talent Allison Smith.

If you've listened to the public airwaves, used an automated phone system, participated in a phone survey, or even used a talking thermostat, you're probably familiar with Allison Smith.

One of the most prevalent telephone voices in the world today, Allison has

voiced platforms for Vonage, Bell Canada, Cingular, Verizon, Qwest, Twitter Fone, Hawaiian Telcom — as well as being the voice of the Asterisk Open Source PBX. Her clients include Marriott Hotels, 3M, Pfizer, Toyota, Victoria's Secret, Bank of America and EBay among many others.

Her website is www.theivrvoice.com and www.theasteriskvoice.com.

Allison's Top 15 Rules

for a Successful IVR

From my experience in voicing IVR systems each and every day, I've acquired a bit of a working knowledge about the common pitfalls and aspects which can radically improve the flow of an IVR.

Through trial and error — and making the most out of badly written scripts while rejoicing in well-written ones — I can tell you what works and what likely won't.

I have arrived at a "Top Ten" list (well, actually, 15) of common pitfalls which I perceive to be the biggest barriers that get in the way of well-meaning companies just wanting to have an efficient method in which to guide their customers around their company's structure, and their clients — who only want the path of least resistance (and least frustration) to interacting with the company.

A point of clarification — and this was a big watershed moment when this was pointed out to me by noted Asterisk guru Jim Van Meggelen: "IVR" seems to be a catch-all term which (we think) applies to a device which automatically transfers the caller to an extension

without the intervention of an operator — this is actually an "Auto Attendant".

IVR — or Interactive Voice Response — is a technology that allows a computer to detect voice and DTMF keypad inputs or by speech recognition. In the telephony industry, "IVR" has come to be a generic term which has taken

on the meaning of "Those Automated Prompts Which Guide You Around a Telephone Tree" (I'm guilty of generic-

izing that, too — my domain is theIVRvoice.com — but to hedge my bets, I also immediately purchased theautoattendantvoice.com after Mr. Van Meggelen set me straight. I'm not taking any chances.) For the interest of simplicity, and the universality of its use, I will continue to use "IVR" as the catchall term which describes the automated nature of a telephony system. Even though it may be perpetuating a misnomer.

IVR allows a computer to detect voice, DTMF keypad inputs and to recognize speech.



So on with that “Top 15 List”

If I had to narrow down the most common mistakes in writing and executing IVR scripts, I could probably boil them down into fifteen major “rules” which should be broken only at your own peril (and only if your goal is to create a frustrating experience for your customer base):

1. Don't Overestimate Your Listener's Attention Span
2. Do Not Create Fake Mailboxes
3. Keep Things Simple
4. Always Give Callers an Opt-“In”
5. Front-load Important Information
6. Understand What Constitutes a “Prompt”
7. Understand The Effects of Proper Punctuation in Concatenation
8. Do Not Give Directions To Your Office/Facility
9. Give a Pronunciation Guide for Proper Names and Place Names
10. Name Your Company Something That Needs No Special Instruction
11. Don't Go Overboard with Niceties
12. Read The Copy Out Loud
13. Be Clear on Your Company's Vision/Image— And Be Able To Explain That To Me
14. Don't Front-load Too Much Information in the Opening Greeting
15. Write in a Conversational Tone

In each section, I'll spotlight one of these aspects and explain in detail why following the above points will ensure a less-frazzled clientele, and you will enjoy the bonus of calls coming in following a nicely organized structure and being dealt with in a timely manner. Bliss!

#1:

Don't Overestimate Your Listener's Attention Span

The very first rule is perhaps the pivotal and most important one of all — a good place to start. If you accomplish this one, it will be easy sailing going forward.

The number one mistake that most people make — when sitting down and coming up with a script that will greet their company's callers — is over-informing in the opening “main” prompt. Packing in too much information and detail into a ‘directory’ can be confusing. Keep it concise. The sole function of the directory is to welcome your callers and sort their requests to the appropriate departments.

I encounter opening greetings almost every day which sound a little like this: (copied verbatim from an actual script. The names have been changed):



Don't use your greeting to dazzle customers or overload them with information.

“Thank you for calling ABC Grommets — the award-winning grommets you’ve read about in *Time* and the *Economist*! Are you constantly disappointed in your grommet choice? Are you continually replacing grommets purchased from that *other* company? You’ve called the right place. Our grommets are 100% nickel, American made, and come in the widest spectrum of sizes and weights in the business. Your satisfaction is our complete focus. We pride ourselves on not only a superior product, but also the best service possible. We look forward to giving you the same care and attention that we’re famous for. If you know your party’s extension, please enter it now. Otherwise...”

They’re kidding, right?

They’re actually wanting to make customers listen to that gigantic welcoming speech — and this is *before* they’ve even been offered a list of extensions to choose from?

Save the informational, “sales-y” content for your on-hold program.

Don’t forget — it’s likely that customers who are cold-calling already know about your company via your website, and are quite possibly calling as a second-string of contact. By all means, confirm that they have the right ABC Grommets on the line (“Thank you for calling ABC Grommets — the #1 supplier of grommets to the Eastern Seaboard...”) but then, immediately start the process of dividing callers into extensions.

Think about someone who calls your company multiple times, and how irritating it would be to have to listen to that entire, lengthy commercial more than once. Defer to people’s time constraints (and patience levels) and keep your opening greeting as concise,

grabby, interesting-without-being-wordy, and as humanely short as possible.

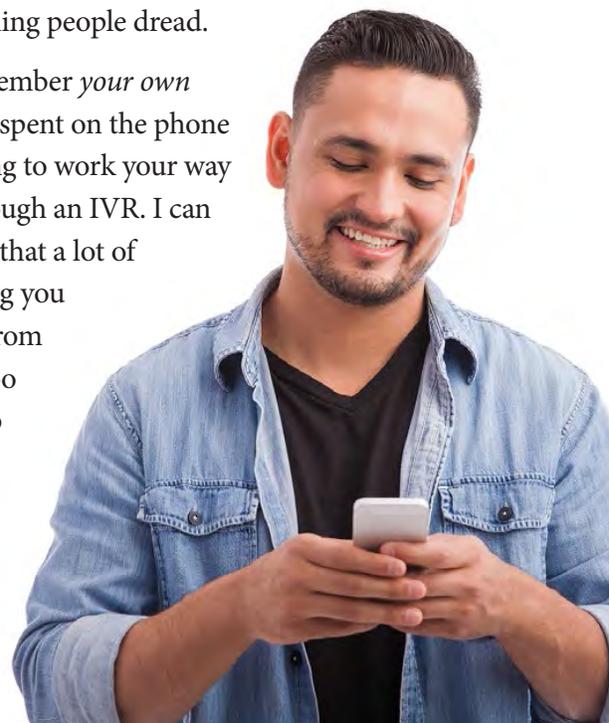
Keep it simple. Keep it short. Resist the temptation to use your main greeting as a way of dazzling customers or overloading them with information now that you have them “cornered”.

The purpose of a good opening greeting is to organize your callers to the right department

Impart only the basic amount of information to set the tone and to best shuffle your customers to the appropriate department — and never forget that the purpose of a good opening greeting is to organize your callers to the right department, so that they may be best served, and your staff’s time is spent most effectively. Plain and simple.

Keep this maxim about brevity — and attention spans — in your mind as you draft *all* the options in your phone tree, and you’ll have a smooth, succinct system that’s a joy to navigate around. OK, maybe not a “joy”. But not something people dread.

It might help to remember *your own* last frustrating time spent on the phone when you were trying to work your way painfully slowly through an IVR. I can almost promise you that a lot of that powerless feeling you encountered came from having to listen to too much, and having to part with even more precious time.



#2:

Do Not Create Fake Mailboxes

About a year ago, I recorded an IVR for a small independent dry cleaning business — not really a Mom and Pop company; they were located in outlets across three states, and were doing very well — they prided themselves on fitting in seamlessly into the communities they served and they were at just the right size for their comfort level. When I recorded their system, a request for a total re-record came in (never a good thing) but their reason for the redo was unique and sticks with me to this day: my usual professional tone was seen as too “highbrow” for them. Created too much of a “big company” impression. They didn’t want to be “Martinizing”; they wanted to sound “local”... friendly ... and accessible.



This is in sharp contrast with how *most* companies I voice for would like to come across — I would estimate that 80% of the companies who hire me to voice their systems are small and would like to sound bigger. Almost all firms have their eye on growth; the best way to do that is to create the impression that they’re already there.

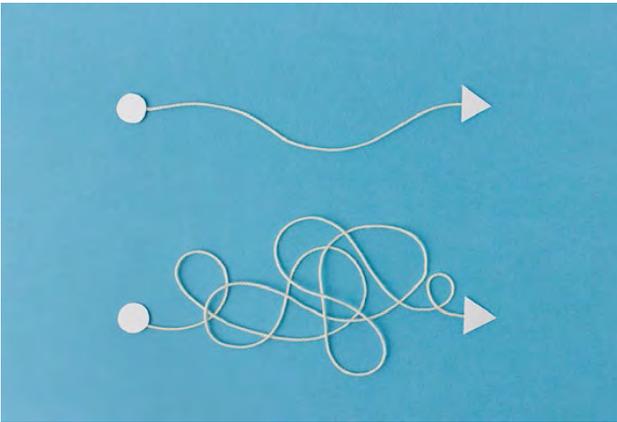
A common technique to “manufacture” the impression that a company is bigger than it really is, is to invent a lengthy menu of mailboxes which technically don’t exist — an impressive, vast menu which goes on for 12, 13, 14 options or more — all in

an attempt to articulate to the caller that they are legitimate; the caller has reached a well-staffed company who needs *that many* mailboxes to keep all requests organized and processed appropriately.

it’s easy for the person in charge of monitoring numerous, fake mailboxes to overlook one or two of them for a couple of weeks.

Many (or all) of the mailboxes will reroute to a single point of contact, but as pointed out by Matt Florell of Vicidial (who, along with Jim Van Meggelen, acts as my “IVR *senseis*” for this series of articles — their input has already been invaluable) — it’s easy for the person in charge of monitoring the various mailboxes to overlook one or two of them for a couple of weeks, and “then they end up with 300 voicemails and only notice it when Asterisk hits its limit,” warns Matt. “Sending voicemails to an email address and auto-deleting from Asterisk does help with this,” continues Matt: “... but the flipside to that is that your company’s SPAM filter starts to think these messages are SPAM and deletes them.”

I submit to all IVR designers the importance of keeping the opening menu as simple as possible to navigate around — and this means to only feature the mailboxes which are actually assigned. It respects the caller’s time; it streamlines the system, and it prevents missed messages and botched follow-through. The idea that a more impressive feeling is created with a menu full of unnecessarily bloated options is counter what you’ve possibly encountered in your own telephone experiences — personally, I’m usually grateful for three or four simple options, narrowing down the likelihood in my mind that I have chosen the correct department for my inquiry.



#3: Keep Things Simple

Many writers of IVR systems feel like they have their callers “captive”, and that now that they have them listening to their menu of options, now is a great opportunity to sell to them; to educate them in detail, and to reassure them that they’ve made the right decision by calling their company (which can be artificially made to sound bigger and more impressive than it actually may be by creating fake options and forcing callers to listen to the entire selection of options which, essentially, go nowhere.)

The customers who call into your business are busy people. They are probably over-stressed multi-taskers who simply want to accomplish what they need to accomplish in this call and move along. Your job — as the constructor of the telephone systems which “sorts” callers into appropriate departments — is to make their experience in your IVR as simplified and efficient as possible — hence, **Rule #3: Keep Things Simple.**

If it feels like I’m belaboring the point of simplicity, brevity, and clarity to death, I likely am. As someone who on a daily basis voices systems for a myriad of companies, I can tell you that I always have in mind — while I’m voicing the prompts — how it will feel when someone will call into this system. Will they let out a sigh, dejected, as they realize that in order to get to the department they need to speak with, they will *first*

have to endure a commercial, emphasizing the benefits and wonderments of the company they’ve dialed? Will they become overwhelmed and confused by too many options — or options which are so similar as to confuse the decision of which to press? Will their selection be filtered down into too many confusing subsets?

It goes both ways: you will want to ensure that the information you’re asking for from callers is information which will not overload your organization, or make it a challenge to follow through. Just last week, I read a mailbox greeting which instructed the callers: “... For a faster response, please leave your name, number, and brief message explaining why you’re interested in partnering with us, along with your commitment level, your main passion, and the reason why you have decided to enter our industry.” You could really be

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inviting trouble there; most people wouldn’t likely take advantage of the situation and leave a half-hour long manifesto. But a surprisingly large number will. You need to invite that same clarity, brevity, and economy in a request for incoming information if you have any hope of boiling down the information gathered into a useful form and following through.

Reduce down the choices into the simplest options. Get callers to their needed department as quickly as possible. Don’t ask for information to be input — such as pin or account numbers — if the live agent is just going to ask for the information again. And above all: respect the caller’s time and energy.

Next, we’re going to be drilling deeper into the mechanics of sorting your callers into various departments, by giving them the option of not participating in the format you’ve designed at all.

#4:

Always Give Callers An “Opt-In”

Even the best-designed IVR systems need a “safety switch”; a cut-off valve that will — in essence — enable callers to bail out of the menu at any time. In case people just don’t want to “play”, I’ve created Rule #4: Always Give Callers An Opt-In.

Jim Van Meggelen, Asterisk wonk extraordinaire — and one of my “IVR dojos” puts it best: “Your callers are not obligated to follow your script. If they get frustrated, they will either dial ‘0’ or hang up. Put most commonly used selections first,” he recommends.



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Jim Van Meggelen
Asterisk Wonk Extraordinaire

It makes perfect sense: because you’re already committed to keeping things as simple as possible, to enable people to be sorted into the right “category” for service, it just makes sense to offer only the most widely used

options. To offer the most *probable* options first. And to track how many people dump out altogether and select “0”. Jim adds: “A good IVR system will keep track of what choices were made (or not made). Use these reports to tweak your call flow. Note that if a large percentage of callers are pressing ‘0’. That is a sign that your IVR is not serving the needs of the caller.”

Don’t try to change the callers. Instead change your IVR.

Jim recommends handling callers dialing ‘0’ by connecting them to a live operator rather than a more detailed sub-directory. “They’ve pressed ‘0’ for one of two reasons: 1) They want to talk to somebody live, or 2) Your IVR did not present them with the options they need. Either way, unless you want to upset and alienate your callers, you need to get them to a human being.”

The point we’re trying to get across: in a perfect world, *one* IVR option out a small selection will help every caller. It’s an imperfect world, so there must be a plan to address the eventuality that none of the options might be pertinent to your customer. Rather than have them opt out — hanging up and moving on to your competitor — let’s install an escape hatch ... but one that is traceable; one that measures how many people had to resort to using it, and arrive at solutions of how to manage callers through a touch-key option instead of wearing out that ‘0’ button.

As only he can, Jim sums it up perfectly: “Do not try to change the callers. Instead change your IVR.”

The next of the “15 rules of IVR” is one of my favorites — and one which I see violated almost every day in my job of voicing IVR scripts.

#5:

Front-Load Important Information

I enjoy telling the story of the IVR I recently voiced for a large Cardiology consortium, with offices located across the Southern US. They, unfortunately, were guilty of violating #2 of the “15 rules of IVR: Thou Shalt Not Create Fake Mailboxes”, which meant they had about 15 options to choose from (most routing back to one or two basic points of contact) — way too many choices to force their patients to listen to.



Offer the most important, time-sensitive, safety-related, and crucial information off the top of your phone menu.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I read option #15: “If this is a medical emergency, hang up, and dial 911.” If someone was experiencing crushing chest pains and instead of calling for emergency help, they made the judgment call to ring up their primary care cardiologist instead, (whose staff won't be retrieving the message til the next morning) wouldn't you want to set them straight sooner rather than later?

It is *critical* to offer the most important, time-sensitive, safety-related, and crucial information off the top of your phone menu. The popular line of thinking is that people need to hear the entire menu before making their choices; that they'll just select the first option

they hear, regardless of the urgency of their request or appropriateness of their selection, thus engaging the wrong call center agent or worse — abusing your “emergency” option.

It is *vital* that your client base have an emergency option straight out of the gate — especially if your business functions in a medical capacity — or even if internet or network connectivity is at stake or essential services like power service is affected. If you offer a service in which consumers could have a dire or imminent need to reach someone immediately, you must offer an “escape hatch” as a first point of triaging calls. Many companies for which I've voiced have set up a dedicated extension strictly for emergency support situations — and warn of penalties and service call charges for those who are not entitled to use it — as a way of swiftly handling those issues requiring imminent attention and screening out those who don't.

Give an emergency “fail-safe” escape hatch at the beginning; then, assign the mailbox options to be “top-heavy” — those most commonly-used or likely to be needed options off the top — and have them cascade down (in *five* options, max!) in likelihood of selection/importance. It will improve call sorting and efficiency on your end, and it will be a more humane method of handling your callers, vastly improving their experience in your call structure.

If you offer a service in which consumers could have a dire or imminent need to reach someone immediately, you must offer an escape hatch.





A prompt goes from edit point to edit point.

#6:

Understand What Constitutes a 'Prompt'

This series of “rules”, guiding you to writing clear, easy-to-understand IVR prompts is venturing into the “fine-tuning” mechanics of constructing prompts — this latest rule: “Understand What Constitutes a Prompt” is an important aspect to grasp in order to make sure that all your options in your phone tree are covered by a corresponding prompt — and that you understand how much you’re purchasing from your voice talent.

When you order Asterisk prompts via the Digium site, there is a pricing algorithm in which an increment of funds buys a certain block of words. When hired independently, I (and most other voice talent) charge by the prompt. Up to ten modest-sized prompts fits into my half-hour prorate; anything over that constitutes the

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Trick question:

Below is a single prompt, correct?:

“You have entered (insert extension number), the desk of (insert staff member’s name) in the (insert staff member’s department). Unfortunately, (staff member) is unavailable to take your call. Please leave a message, and (staff member) will return your call between the hours of (insert staff member’s office hours). Thank you for calling!”

Incorrect.

Fifteen separate prompts, actually, and more, depending on how many extension numbers there are, how many staff member’s names and departments there are, and how many office hour options there are. It needs to be pointed out that the above sequence cannot run continually — each option requires a break in the file, and another file to play the option, so it really should be written as such:

1. You have entered...
2. ...Extension 101...
3. ...Extension 102...
4. ...Extension 103 (and so on...)
5. ...the desk of...
6. ...Frank
7. ...Mike
8. ...Sven (and whomever else is assigned an extension)
9. ...Accounting Department.

hour rate. The most common question I hear back from clients (especially those new to the process) is: “What constitutes a prompt?”

Basically, from edit point to edit point. Where a prompt needs to be cut in order to be a free-floating entity, ready to be plugged into your phone tree anywhere it needs to concatenate with other prompts. The prompt below would be universally recognized to be a “prompt”: “Thank you for calling Morrison, Incorporated — the nation’s number-one ranked search engine optimization company. Please make your selection at any time: for Sales, press 1. For Accounting, press 2. For Marketing, press 3. For all other enquiries, press 0. Thanks again for calling Morrison, Incorporated.”

Very straightforward.

- 10.... Marketing Department. (And any other departments you need)
11. Unfortunately...
12. ...is unavailable to take your call. Please leave your message, and...
13. ...will return your call between the hours of...
14. 9am to 5pm, Pacific Standard Time (and any other schedule possibilities you need)
15. Thank you for calling!

While it may seem like hair-splitting, for an IVR designer to have a clear understanding of which prompts he needs for every available option, and to have an understanding of how a sound engineer (or voice talent) needs to break them into separate sound files, the recording and editing of the files will occur smoothly, and it will prevent you from going over-budget—an all-important consideration.

Others: not so much. Below are other examples of “prompts” — which, while they look like fragments and not at all complete entities, are prompts in and of themselves, because they need to be edited into just that little bite-sized piece, in order to concatenate into a sequence:

“...is away from his desk.”

“The department you have selected...”

“...four...”

.....each of the above prompts edits exactly where they begin and end — hence they are each a “prompt”. (Number sequences are particularly befuddling to people — and, in fact, there’s a bit of an in-joke in the telephony voice-over community, where we imitate customers who say: “I only have about five prompts — oh, and the numbers 1 to 100”. A number sequence from 1 to 100 only actually takes about 10 minutes to voice — to edit each number into a separate sound file is about an hour and a half of studio time.)



A number sequence from 1 to 100 only actually takes about 10 minutes to voice – to edit each number into a separate sound file is about an hour and a half of studio time.



Word of the Day: Concatenation means “to link together”.

#7:

Understand The Effects of Proper Punctuation in Concatenation

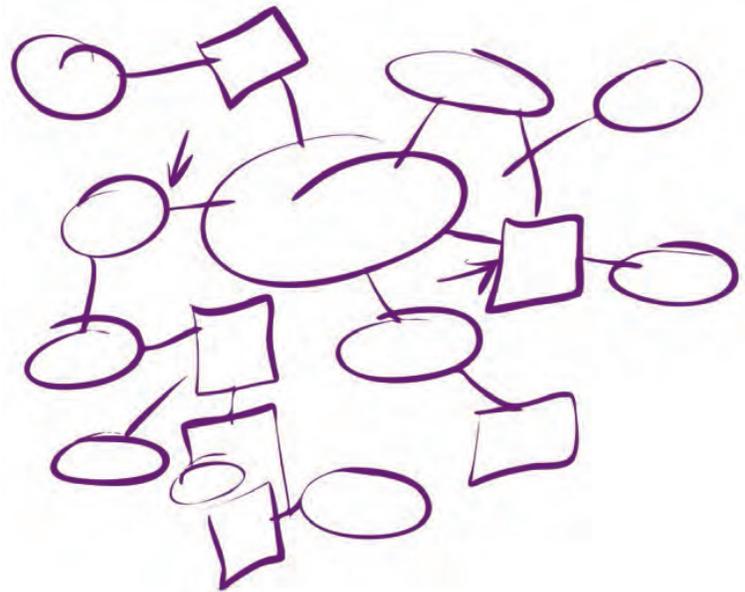
Despite the fancy title, this is perhaps the simplest lesson to absorb about the writing of good, logical IVR trees — and one which virtually guarantees that you will get the proper intended pronunciation from your voice talent. Nothing is worse than prompts forged together from uncohesive, inconsistently-inflected fragments which clunk along strangely instead of flowing seamlessly. It's very obvious when sound fragments meant for a specific aspect of a sequence are attempted to be used interchangeably throughout an IVR concatenation. Rule #7 aims to remedy that.

When writing prompts, simply adhere to a basic protocol involving nothing more than capital letters, ellipses, and periods.

I regularly get prompts posted on the Digium site, with lengthy explanations attached to them, such as: “Hi, Allison: this prompt will be at the beginning of the prompt, and followed by the number sequence of the customer’s pin number, so it should sound like you’re trailing off...kind of like: ...”

You can easily save yourself the trouble of typing out a lengthy explanation if you simply adhered to a basic

protocol when writing prompts — a painfully simple protocol involving nothing more than capital letters, ellipses, and periods.



Starting off a sentence with the capital letter:

“**Your** pin number”

...definitely lets the voice talent know that it’s the start of the thought, and when voicing it, we will “launch” the prompt as such, with a strong “start”.

Add ellipses after that phrase:

“**Your** pin number...”

...and we’re really in business now. This effectively communicates to the announcer that this phrase starts

off strong and will be followed by something else — whether it's the sequence of the customer's pin numbers or something like: "...is incorrect."

If you write:

"...your pin number."

...I will instinctively know that this phrase is to concatenate with a previous thought, such as "Please press 9 to change..." but also needs to end in a finite way.

For bonus points: if you were to write:

"...your pin number..."

...you guessed it. I'm going to inflect the beginning in a neutral way (not a "strong start") — because something will be flowing before this phrase...and I'm going to finish it off *not* in a finite, conclusive way either — because it's obvious that something will be tagged along at the end (something like: "Please enter...your pin number...followed by the pound key.")

Phrases can have an "up-ending" cadence, a "down-ending" cadence, or a "neutral" cadence.

Covering all bases by making sure that you have all possibilities necessary — for example: all key phrases have an "up-ending" cadence, a "down-ending" cadence, and a "neutral" cadence, you'll be covered for all eventualities.

It seems glaringly basic; but these rudimentary rules of writing segments the right way will allow your voice talent to intuit what "treatment" to give the phrase in order for it to link successfully with other fragments and allow the system to flow in a conversational, non-mechanical fashion.

The next rule of IVR is derived from a common pitfall that many IVR writers stumble into — lengthy, long-winded directions to the business in question.

#8:

Do Not Give Directions to Your Office/Facility

We've probably all heard the option in a typical IVR tree, offering "... for directions to our office, press 7". You have also probably speculated as to whether or not anyone actually makes use of that option, and whether the option is even remotely necessary, especially with the prevalence of GPS mapping available in most hand-held PDA devices, and being pretty much standard in most newer cars.



I can tell you that almost every day I have to read extremely long, convoluted, and complicated instructions on how clients can make their way to offices, which I record for IVR trees for both Asterisk and non-Asterisk customers — it's a feature of the phone tree which people think of as a courtesy; a necessity, and a lovely considerate "extra" to work into their menu.

What seldom gets taken into consideration is how overwhelming it is for clients to hear a description of each turn onto every off-ramp described as you approach the office from all possible directions — and some of them can get frighteningly detailed: "...drive to the end of Storwich Road. Keep left and take the traffic circle, exiting at the first left. You'll see a Piggly Wiggly on the left, and a war memorial on the right. Turn right at the war memorial. Drive 1.5 miles. If you pass the Staples to your left and the Starbucks to your

right, you've gone too far.") Additionally, no one can possibly listen to the instructions as they're driving and make all necessary turns, real-time — as the message is playing — the same way that a GPS "meters" out the instructions, mapped by your position in relation to the next instructed landmark.

Directions waste time, are obsolete, and menus would be more concise and streamlined without them.

It's one of those aspects of the modern phone tree which many people feel compelled to include. My "IVR dojos" and I agree: they're time-wasting, they're by and large obsolete, and IVR menus would be refreshingly more concise and streamlined without in-depth directional instructions. How wonderful, instead, would it be to hear: "We're located off Drake Avenue, in the Fisher Medical Park. Program 1225 Fisher Lane, Detroit, Michigan into any GPS-enabled device for detailed directions to our facility."

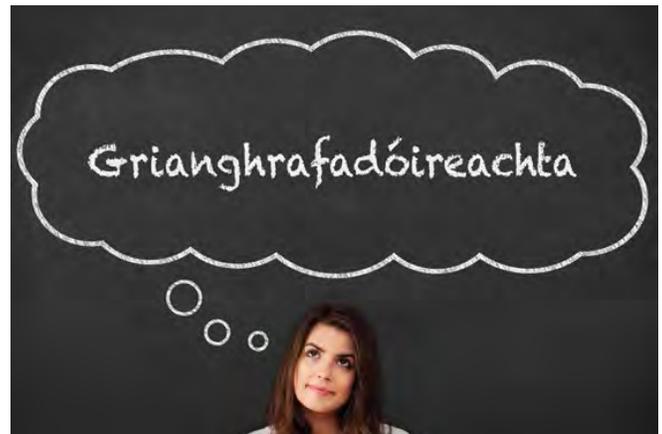
Wonderful simplicity! An economy of information. And I guarantee: less overwhelmed customers.

#9: Give a Pronunciation Guide for Proper Names and Place Names

It never fails — when I receive a script to voice for a client, it's not unusual for me to get a detailed phonetic explanation of extremely common names/words (which quite frankly, are very hard to mess up and actually need no special instruction), and it's surprising how often I'm left completely in the dark about the correct way pronounce people's names in a phone tree, location names, or any other words which may have a regionality or accepted pronunciation for which I'm unfamiliar.

You should have a fairly accurate idea of the many different ways in which your staff member's names

(and possibly even your own) can be mangled on a daily basis (believe it or not, even a name as basic as mine — Smith — still elicits some people over the phone questioning me: "Is that with a 'Y' or an 'I'"?). When submitting your phone tree with a menu of your personnel's names, please provide a guide (either in a paragraph prefacing the script, or right next to the name, in brackets) explaining how it should be pronounced. Similes are good ("Saier' sounds like 'player'"), and make sure to capitalize emphasis points ("Tajera' is pronounced 'ta-HAIR-ah").



Irish Gaelic, means "photography".

I recently voiced a huge IVR for a well-known busline — they were savvy enough to realize that — while I am pretty intuitive about figuring out the pronunciation of place names (and dictionary.com has a wonderful audio component which can direct you how to pronounce many words) — they kept in mind that I'm Canadian. Place names which may seem commonplace and part of the regular American vernacular (Wilkes-Barre, Reading, Ma Honing) may need a little extra finessing for a voice talent based in another region (and — similarly — they might struggle if they had to say Tatamagouche or Antigonish...).

Of course, there are some well-intentioned clients who supply pronunciations notes which defy all logic: "The 'K' in 'Kaboodle' should sound like the hard 'G'

in ‘Gorilla’, the ‘oo’ is like ‘ahhh’, as in ‘yawn’ {but not too drawn out}, and the ‘d’ has an almost ‘th’ sound, like in the word ‘lake’”.

A clear, informative pronunciation guide is a welcomed and extremely beneficial feature to any IVR script with

Staff members’ names (and possibly even your own) can be mangled on a daily basis.



Latvian for “in a counter-clockwise direction”.

pronunciations of anything which has the possibility of multiple pronunciations. Think of which words have a good chance of going multiple ways, and indicate to your voice talent which way you’d like them to go.

#10: Name Your Company Something That Needs No Special Instruction

I acknowledge that it’s probably too late to implement this.

By the time they hire me to voice their IVR’s, the opportunity has likely already passed to talk to people about why they’ve named their companies what they have — many late nights have already been spent and

reams of legal yellow paper consumed brainstorming about how to make their company’s name as unique and significant as possible; coming up with imaginative and innovative ways of spelling ordinary words to make them their own, riffing on existing words and modifying them to make them unique, or building a name from several different components which represent their company; a name which will identify their organization and which will no doubt look great on letterhead, a website, booth banners, and business cards.



It’s important that your company name be memorable and distinct, but it should also not need a tutorial on how to pronounce it properly.

I am astounded at how many companies have me re-do their opening messages — after having voiced them to the best of my ability — due to mispronouncing their company’s name. I’ve even had clients — at the outset of a job — send an intonation file of *them* voicing the company’s name — or they schedule a pre-recording call with me — because (in their words): “The company name is kind of tricky — in fact, almost everybody gets it wrong! But it’s really important that you voice the opening message with the definitive pronunciation.”

I’ll say! I would think it would be crucially important that *everyone* say it in the “definitive way”, from the receptionist to the UPS delivery man to the people manning your booth at a trade show to someone seeing it for the first time. While it’s important that your company name be unforgettable, distinct, not apt to be confused with your competitor’s, and easy to recall, it should also probably not need a special tutorial on how to pronounce it properly.

I'm officially *begging* you to re-think any clever liberties taken with the spelling of words to snazz up your company's moniker.

I'll add even further to that list, and suggest that not only is it important that your company's name visually **look** impressive — I submit that it is crucial that the name actually "scans" to ear effectively. You will be **saying** your company's name probably more than people will see it in its written form. You need to take into consideration how easy the name will be to "hear" — and to "say" — and imagine someone hearing your company name for the first time and immediately turning to type it into a web browser — wouldn't you want to ensure that they hit *your* website every time; that your site is as easy as possible to find, and that the complex and unique spelling of your company's name isn't snagging their search?



Suppose — after much late-night work shopping, you've decided to call your exciting, innovative company "Ignyshyn". Cool, right? A play on the word "Ignition"! It sounds just the same as the mainstream word, but it's spelled so ... *imaginatively!*

I'm officially *begging* you to re-think any and all clever liberties taken with the spelling of words to snazz up your company's moniker. It needlessly complicates the name, and makes it almost impossible for customers to find you — especially if you don't take measures to have your voice talent painstakingly spell out the website ("Go to Ignysyn.com. That's I-G-N-Y-S-H-Y-N, dot com") — which a surprising number of clients don't have me do.) Do they just presume people are going to magically type in "Newtrality.com" or "Akwizytion.com"? Chances are, (especially if the difference in

spelling isn't pointed out in the copy), they'll follow what their ear is telling them and go to "Neutrality.com" and "Acquisition.com", experience brief confusion, and move on to your competition.

Especially vexing are company names with numerals written in — some seem straightforward ("Innov8") but even those also frequently come with instructions to point out the play on words ("but try not to really say 'eight' at the end ...") and others are just plain befuddling ("4ti2de" — "fortitude". Gah!).

I recently read the opening greeting for a company who decided to make their name an amalgam of the founder's first names — similar to "Johareth, Inc." Given no guidance as to the pronunciation, I went for the pronunciation: "Joe-HARR-eth." Turns out, the names the title is based on were actually Johann, Harry, and Ethan — it would be more like "Yo-HAIR-eeeth." But how was I to know? And how will the customers of Johareth possibly know? Especially without the "tutorial" on how to pronounce it.

I submit some very strong cases in point: some of the most recognizable and profitable companies operating today do so under names which have practically no chance of misinterpretation, mispronunciation, and have zero confusion associated with the names: Apple, Microsoft, IBM, Google. Nobody's inclined to say "Ibbim" instead of saying the individual letters of "IBM"; I would wager that there has never been an operator at Microsoft who had to correct a customer



calling in: “Well, actually, it’s pronounced “MY-crow-soft”, not “MEEK-ro-soft”, and even at first glance at the nonsensical, entirely manufactured word “Google”, you instantly knew how to say it, and I’ll bet you never slipped and called it “Goggle” (or typed in “Gewgal” as a search term.)

Simplicity, accessibility, and a turnkey approach to naming your company is key — the name should speak for itself. It should stand alone. It should not be an unpronounceable in-joke, and it only benefits you and your company if you create as simple a path as possible for customers to find you.



#11: Don't Go Overboard With Niceties

We are sensitive to the fact that customers and clients might have a bit of a delay before they are assisted by a live agent — and rightfully so. We are more than aware that their time is valuable and that waiting — for even a relatively short period of time — can erode the customer’s patience and heighten the possibility of them hanging up and going elsewhere to have their needs met.

As someone who is enlisted daily to voice telephone prompts and on-hold systems for a variety of industries, I can tell you that the over-use of “niceties” — endless platitudes which gush all over the customers, thanking them for holding, and constantly congratulating them for their patience — after awhile come across as disingenuous, and actually harms your relationship.

Whenever I’m asked to voice an on-hold system whose total run time is in excess of 10 minutes, I’m convinced that this indicates a flaw in call response time and a

glaring inefficiency of the company’s call center staff. A hard look at your call drop-out rate will let you know if your response time — with the call either ideally retrieved by a live agent — but also giving the caller other options (immediate call-back, voicemail) — needs an overhaul. If your on-hold system is peppered with a seemingly endless loop of “We know your time is valuable!” and “Your patience while on hold is appreciated!” this actually works against your goal of placating the customer: if heard too frequently, it comes across as insincere; it also reminds the customer — on a continuous basis — how long they’ve been asked to wait. Show me my time is truly valuable by taking my call — and sooner than later, please.

My advice is always to keep their time on hold as brief as is humanly possible — that’s the dream, anyhow.

Keep your on-hold system deliberately concise, fact-filled, interesting — and thank them — once — for their understanding while they wait for service. Fine-tune your response time and make sure that the customer always

has an out — either by a reliable call-back option (which stays true to its promise of keeping them in queue and stays loyal to that estimate of *when* they can expect a call-back) or a dedicated voicemail box which is serviced regularly and which doesn’t become a catch-all dumping ground for messages.

By streamlining both prompts and on-hold messaging to be useful, informative, concise, and genuine, you’re maximizing your efficiency, and sending the strongest message you can to your customers that their patience is *most definitely* appreciated.

Fine-tune your response time and make sure that the customer always has an out.





Hearing how a prompt sounds is very different from reading it. Read your script out loud before you send it.

#12: **Read the Copy Out Loud**

You've written your IVR script. You've silently read it over and over — you may even have mouthed it or murmured it at your desk a few times. It's been run past others on your team — it may even have made it through your legal department, if necessary. All good checks and balances. You're missing one crucial aspect of making sure your IVR *sounds* logical and flows smoothly: you haven't actually read it out loud.

There's a huge difference between seeing your IVR prompts written on the page and actually having them "hit" your ear — either by you intoning them, or having them read out loud to you.

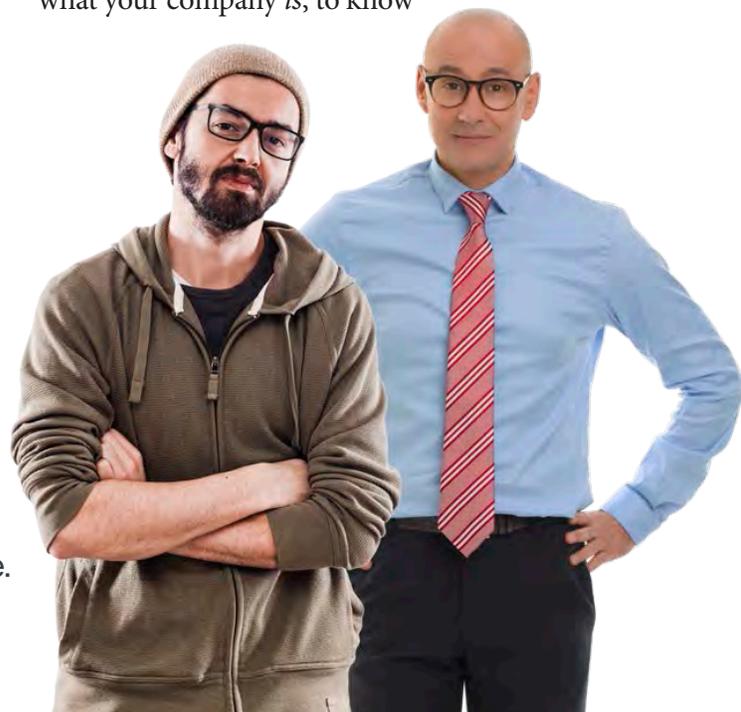
IVR prompts are, after all, an aural experience. Callers will *listen* to them. It's surprising how many writers of IVR systems don't have the opportunity — or don't think it necessary — to hear the prompts in their *spoken* form. But I'm telling you — as someone who

voices IVR systems every day — it's a crucial and pivotal step to take — as much as it may drag you out of your comfort zone. Many neglect to hear what their prompts will actually sound like — and sometimes awkwardness and phrasing problems only come to light after I've recorded them and they're being listened to by the team who sent me the prompts.

Hearing what IVR prompts will sound like is a vastly different experience from eyeballing a script — so I urge all clients to lock themselves in their office or find an empty conference room and "hear" what the prompts will sound like — you'll be surprised what alterations or changes will come to mind once you get the prompts "on their feet" and hear what your customers will hear.

#13: **Be Clear on Your Company's Vision/Image – and be Able to Explain That to Me**

This is an aspect of writing an IVR which many people don't even think about — when I pose the question of what "image" they're trying to convey to companies who hire me to voice their systems, the question is usually met with silence or an overwhelming sense of "That's a great question!" To have a strong picture of what your company *is*; to know



Know your audience.

exactly the image you're looking to project; and to consider how to translate that image through various avenues — whether it be through the design of your website, the décor of your office — even your letterhead — is crucially important.

Knowing the mood and personality of a company is a great help to talent when voicing prompts for your telephone system.

Why should your telephone system be any different?

Is your company a stoic, older, established and conservative firm, with a similar clientele? Or are you a young, irreverent startup, looking to create a hip, almost aloof persona? Or somewhere in between? To know the “mood”, “feel”, and the “personality” of the company is a great help to me (and other voice talent) when we're assigned the task of voicing the IVR prompts for your telephone system. We can adapt our “sound” and “attitude” to match the image you'd like to convey: if your clientele is straight business; no flashiness or showiness evident; if their needs are urgent or fast-paced — it's good to know all that. If you're catering to a generally older client base (or a client base whose health/hearing/reaction time may be compromised) we can take that into consideration and be more metered and deliberate in our pace and delivery. A more informal, accessible company may desire a conversational, more casual approach. (I have told the story about a dry cleaning firm who had me re-do their system — which was done in my default, business-like tone, because it sounded too “high falutin' ” and ran the risk of alienating their primarily small-market customer base. They wanted someone who sounded local; someone who might ask how the customer's kids are doing in school. Anything more formal than that sounded ... well, stuffy.)

It's a good idea to brainstorm about the image you'd like to project via your IVR system; to keep that consistent with all other branches of your company; to truly write in that style (of course, reading everything out loud, as per the last section of this guide) and be ready to articulate in real terms to your voice talent the end “feeling” or “perception” you'd like to leave your customer with. If your voice talent is directable and versatile, it should be a fairly easy adjustment to make.

#14: Don't Front-Load Your Opening Prompt With Too Much Information

You might well wonder — with the number of possible mailboxes and all the various details required to write a cohesive and smoothly-flowing IVR — why there would be so much emphasis on the opening prompt. After all, you have an entire IVR to win people's confidence, allow them to formulate an opinion about your company, and for your customer to learn all about the company they're about to do business with, right?

Let me make this point most emphatically, and if you take nothing else away from this guide — it is this:

People's Attention Spans Are Shorter Than You Think.

It's a blend between the oft-quoted axiom about “only having one shot at making a first impression”, and the truism that people just plain do not have the time or the patience to listen to a seemingly endless and wordy opening prompt.

I voiced a system not that long ago, and in editing, I timed how long the opening greeting ran until some-



People do not have time or patience to listen to a seemingly endless and wordy opening prompt.

thing substantive (mailbox options?) came up — just over three minutes. Three minutes! The company got into a history of how they got started, what makes them better than their competition, the full lineup of products they carry, their mission statement, where their offices are located ... and then ... after what seemed to be an eternity, they got around to the business of sorting their callers into appropriate queues by offering mailboxes.



Don't use your opening prompt to grip the customer in "captivity", forced to listen to an advertisement.

That is, if their customers are still listening.

Yes, it is important to confirm that they have reached the correct "XYZ Company". And that they are, in fact, the makers of that product the customer is interested in. Even make sure the voice talent voices your slogan with gusto — and then use these critical first seconds to respect the customer's time and get them shuttled off efficiently and quickly to the correct department.

There's many other venues in which to tout your product and give customers as much information as they need: set up a dedicated information line — and make it a line item in your IVR ("To hear more about XYZ's patented solvents and why they are the nation's number one choice in non-toxic and environmentally-friendly solvent solutions, press 5..."). Use your on-hold program as a way of

educating/promoting/selling; making good use of that "limbo" time while customers are on hold. But try your best to not look upon the opening prompt as holding the customer in "captivity" and thinking of the opening prompt as a "commercial". Keep your opening message brief, factual, and even a little curiosity-piquing.

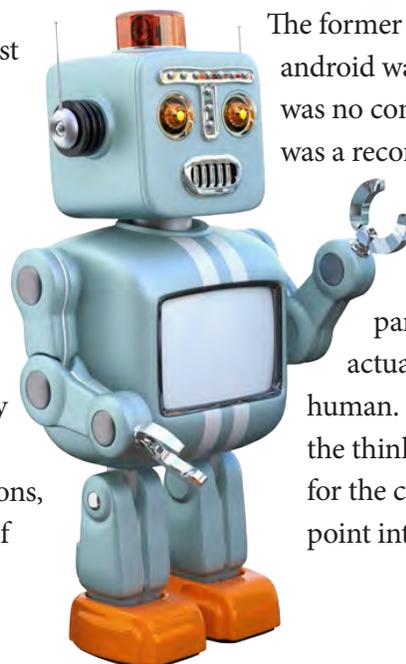
As a customer, nothing wins me over more than a company which respects my shortage of time, acknowledges the frustration inherent in being at the mercy of an automated system, and one which offers additional info if I'm interested — but allows me to opt out if I'm not.

#15:

"Write in a Conversational Tone"

As someone who voices telephone prompts on a daily basis, I'm pleased to report a trend in IVR "style" which makes systems more personable, more accessible — and more "human" than ever before.

IVR designers and writers are getting farther and farther away from the "automaton" style of years past — they are less interested in fostering the "robotic", unemotional voice once thought to be a necessary element in IVR systems, and the tendency is moving more towards an automated voice which sounds conversational, candid, and more like an actual person.



The former gold standard of an automated android was prized for the fact that there was no confusion as whether or not this was a recording you were encountering;

it made the vocal style a non-issue and even left the corporate identity of the company a bit of a mystery until you actually spoke to a flesh-and-blood human. The paradigm has shifted into the thinking that the IVR sets the tone for the caller; your IVR is the entry point into your company — and espe-

Use the critical first seconds to get customers shuttled off to the correct department efficiently and quickly.

cially if your product projects an essence of warmth, humanness, and personability — the way in which your IVR prompt are written — and voiced — should reflect that.

IVR is moving from the “robotic”, unemotional voice. By voicing a prompt’s phrases in consideration of its position within a sequence, you can avoid the flat, nondescript delivery once thought necessary.

The former thinking was that IVR prompts — and in particular, sequential prompts such as numbers, letters, months and days of the month/week — needed to be voiced in a deadpan, neutral fashion in order to concatenate seamlessly. The wisdom was that if we kept things neutral — with no huge fluctuations in inflection — things will flow smoothly. We now know that if the voice talent voices sequential aspects in an “up-ending” way (as if something were to be attached onto the end); a “down-ending” way (as if to cap off something which has preceded it) and in a “neutral” way (to be used wherever its needed in a sequence) — you are covered for any eventuality, and more importantly — allows you to get away from a flat, nondescript delivery once thought to be necessary. You want the free-standing, introductory prompts to flow well with the “canned” stock prompts which handle the technical aspects of giving credit card balances, confirming airline reservations, or letting you know when the next train arrives. With a varied selection of inflection available to the sequential aspects, you can accomplish that.

The script itself must be written in a conversational style — it’s not enough to ask the voice talent to read a

script written in a dry, stodgy, and technical manner in a “casual” style if it’s not written with that style in mind.

There’s a world of difference between: “Slowly and clearly tell me to which city you would like to travel” and “OK. Where do you want to go?” Be clear on the level of informality versus formality you wish to convey — and make sure your prompts are written in a style which reflects that.

Now that you know the 15 rules of writing and executing an IVR script, you’re well on your way to creating phone experiences that drive customer satisfaction and lead to more sales, referrals, and positive feedback. Use this guide as a reference as you plan and build out your IVR, and remember to keep it simple, authentic, conversational, and as thorough as necessary.

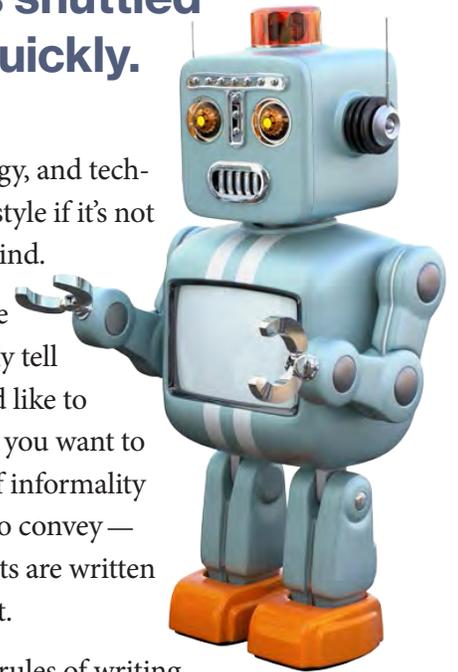
If you want to learn more about Allison and order voice prompts from her, click here:

www.digium.com/products/ivr/allison-smith



Click here to learn more about the Switchvox business phone system and how it empowers you to use IVRs and many other features:

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