

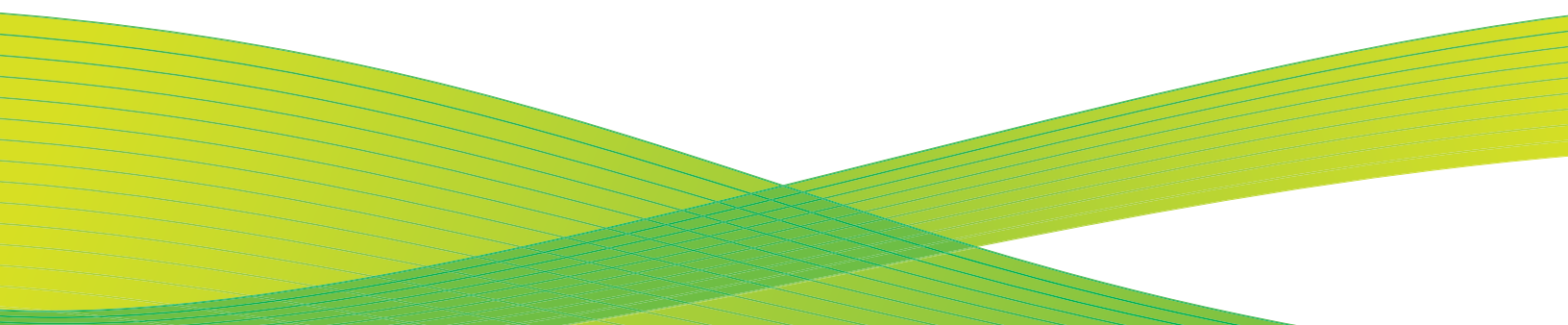


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# Interactive Voice Response

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## Answering the Call for a More Efficient, Cost-Effective Customer Service

There was a time when Interactive Voice Response systems (IVRs) just didn't get any respect. Long waits, numerous key punches and technical difficulties left callers waxing poetic about the days when they could reach a "real person," instead of one of those darn machines.

If that's still your perception of IVRs, it's time to take another look – and listen. The technology has evolved, enhancing the way these systems gather data from ancillary databases, so callers get the information they want more quickly. Integrated computer and telephone systems provide a more seamless customer experience. These advances, in combination with diligent best practices and continuous improvement models, have paid off. Today, a well-managed IVR not only saves organizations money but can actually improve service levels for its callers.

## Say "Hello" to Self-Service

On the simplest terms, an IVR automates the processes of the person in front of the computer who's answering a call and makes the information available 24/7. A wide range of interactions lend themselves to this type of automation: a food stamp recipient wants to check the balance on her debit card on the way to the grocery store; a Medicare recipient wants to know if a deposit was made; an account holder wants to find out if a check cleared; a hospital patient wants to confirm that a benefit has been processed; a frequent flier wants to find his gate. In many cases, such as entitlement programs, talking to a "machine" about personal information may even be preferable to chatting with an actual person – that is, if the experience is a good one.

The more people take advantage of the IVRs, the more companies benefit. Handling a call through an IVR costs between one-seventh and one-tenth of what that same call would cost if handled by a call center representative. An increase in automation can save government entities and companies millions of dollars each year. But an IVR is not an "if you build it, they will come" option. It's a system that requires continuous caller analysis and optimization to deliver maximum benefits to the caller and organization alike.

## Eliminating Old Hang-Ups

A decade or so ago, a theory emerged: People don't like IVRs because the voice is too mechanical. Companies spent time, energy and resources on improving the "voice" part of IVR, even to the point of using specialized voices based on the user community. They also made sure the users could "speak" their response, instead of punching in digits on a dial pad.

Although it makes sense to use speech recognition where it improves automation or provides multiple language options, it wasn't what callers were seeking. Vocal quality, or familiarity, makes far less difference than putting practices in place to deliver good, fast service – and then finding a way to make it even better.

## Dialing In to Customer Needs

A strong IVR solution requires continuous monitoring and analysis to identify patterns. How are people using the system? What are the commonalities? When and at what point do people opt to transfer to an agent – or simply hang up? By monitoring IVR patterns within its call centers, ACS and its IVR partner, CSI, identify ways to increase automation by changing service offerings.

In one instance, we discovered that 85 percent of the people calling in to the State of Georgia's IVR system were checking their debit account balances. Based on that information, ACS and CSI revised the solution. Instead of having to "Press 2" for account balances, every caller received this information automatically. Not only did this save time and improve caller satisfaction, but it also increased automation use by as much as eight percent. Even an incremental increase of this magnitude can increase savings by thousands of dollars, all while improving the user experience in the process.

Call center operators are monitored, as well. If 10 out of 50 employees are answering the same questions about benefits each month, these answers can be automated. If a user starts with an IVR and then decides to transfer to a representative, this process can be made more efficient through integration. Because the representative can "see" the information that's already been input, the caller no longer has to retrieve an I.D. card from her wallet and begin the entire transaction from scratch.

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Automated surveys conducted after IVR calls drive continuous improvement. Did the caller have to search for the answer? Did he get accurate information? Trend reports, based on this input, ensure the IVR delivers what the caller needs.

This vigilant monitoring pays off. By implementing improvements that increase containment rates and reduce call times across 150 IVR applications, ACS and CSI were able to reduce costs by \$1.7 million in FY2007 and another \$1.6 million in FY2008.

## Always Busy, But Never a Busy Signal

In addition to cost savings, one of the biggest benefits of a well-run IVR is the ability to scale up quickly for increased call volume. ACS's partner, CSI, provides a shared service, with three locations and thousands of "ports" throughout the United States to handle spikes in volume. This capability is particularly important for programs such as Medicare, during open enrollment periods. It's also essential in times of crisis.

When Hurricane Gustav made landfall in September 2008, the state of Louisiana was ready. Using the 1-888-LAHELPU IVR application created by ACS and CSI in response to Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Department of Social Services staff made a single phone call into the IVR, instantly enabling an emergency menu of pre-recorded instructions and special routing options. In one day following the hurricane, the IVR processed more than 165,000 calls – 55 times the normal call volume – and no one got a busy signal. This solution wasn't static. To keep pace with the changing caller dynamics during the two weeks following the hurricane, the IVR was modified more than a dozen times.

When the hurricane forced the closing of the Baton Rouge customer support center handling the State's child support program, IVR saved the day. While ACS's emergency response center in San Antonio took calls normally handled by the State's disabled IVR, CSI accelerated the launch of a planned upgrade for that IVR. In less than three days, the new IVR was answering more than 20,000 calls per day. With immediate improvements to host transactions and changes in the IVR script, the new IVR is completing 83 percent of the transactions without transferring callers to a customer service representative, compared to 70 percent with the old IVR. That's 30,000 additional automated calls per month, resulting in both cost savings for the states and increased satisfaction rates for the callers.

## Who's Calling? It's the IVR.

In addition to handling incoming calls with efficiency, some applications lend themselves to an outbound calling element, as well. Take, for example, debit card programs. By proactively letting recipients know that a deposit has been made or that they have a low balance, IVRs reduce incoming inquiries, which translates into reduced costs and a higher level of service.

When the U.S. Treasury was ready to launch a new prepaid debit card program for Social Security benefits, replacing the traditional paper checks, ACS and CSI – in only three months – developed seven separate inbound and outbound IVR applications to address anticipated call volume. The outbound part of this solution is particularly appropriate for the senior population, individuals for whom receiving the monthly check had become a ritual. More than 60 percent of program participants signed up to receive an inbound call when funds are deposited on their cards – a cost-effective way to ease their minds while reducing the influx of inbound calls each month.

Outbound IVR solutions can include fax, email, SMS text messaging or a voice call. These types of proactive communications can be used to answer the question, "Did what I expect to happen actually happen today?" – such as a claim paid or a deposit made. They are also essential in times of emergency, informing groups of people where to go for emergency help or shelter.

## A Direct Line to Savings – and Caller Satisfaction

A well-managed IVR is a critical component in a successful call center solution. Through continual analysis and improvement practices, the IVR can save companies and entities millions, while providing timely, accurate information to callers around the clock. It's a good call – for everyone involved.

You can learn more about us at [www.acs-inc.com](http://www.acs-inc.com).

