



**IVR Static, Web Dynamic  
Update Your Speech Applications Like Your Web Site**

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## Introduction

The nature of business is dynamic, so why are so many speech applications static? Who has not been frustrated by calling a business and hearing, “Please listen carefully as our menu options have changed”. Who knows how long that message has been there, and what percent of customers really care that the menu has changed. They just want to get a task completed. As a contact center manager, you know that when customers call into your speech application or visit your web site, their intent may be to get information, make a reservation, place an order, or speak to a customer service representative. But, when they do make that call, it doesn’t matter if that someone is a live or automated agent, they had better be spot on responsive to that caller, and that means acknowledging that caller with the most up-to-date information and options for them, and not wasting their time with stagnant information like ‘our menu has changed’.

Your customer touch points should be as dynamic as your business, and since all customer interaction is not face-to-face with that personal touch, it’s even more important you ensure your other customer interaction points are. As companies have embraced this ideal more they have ensured that information on their web site changes quickly as customers associate up-to-date information with personal service, especially if that information revolves around the availability of goods and services. If you are in the majority, your web site information is not static. So why are your speech applications static?

Today it is hard to quickly make changes to your speech self-service applications. How do you make changes to menu options, call flows, and call routing? Do you need to outsource the effort to you speech self-service vendor? Do you need to schedule the project with a programmer? How long will it take and how much will it cost? Are there tools available to help you be responsive to changing conditions in your contact center? What are your options for being responsive and what should you be asking vendors when you are looking to develop new contact center speech applications?

## Your Speech Applications Should Change with Your Business

Customer contact is changing and customers are more demanding as they have adapted to being able to get information quickly. Web 2.0 applications, including web services, social networking, podcasts, and blogs have conditioned many consumers to instant, always changing access to information and communication. Businesses have changed along with customers by figuring out how to use information delivery as a way to drive business. For example, a web-based ticketing application is much more efficient and customer friendly when it gives customers up-to-the minute ticket availability and refreshed information within FAQs. Your contact center should be the same. When customers flood the lines to order tickets to a concert

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and the show is sold out, and suddenly the show provider adds additional show times, you should provide instant information to those desperate callers.

In order to keep up with customer needs, you need to change your application based on current business analytics. Being able to add to or change your speech application allows you to be more responsive to callers, by proactively changing or adding content they might need or want to hear. It also enables you to capitalize on information the callers may be able to provide to you, if you could just change your application to ask them.

Your business requires you to have control over making changes to your contact center. You also need the flexibility in making those changes when you can, as fast as possible. Having the ability to change the application, such as content, base call flow, menu items and prompts, on your own, gives you tremendous control in making the most success of your speech applications, on demand, not when you can get changes scheduled.

You should be able to:

- Provide timely, short-term information, such as announcements on holiday specials, or changed hours of operation due to weather conditions, by inserting them into the call flow
- Add or change menu prompts without outside assistance
- Change the call flow logic to route callers to a special group, such as agents handling your holiday special, or group travel for special events, such as the Super Bowl or Olympics
- Insert a seasonal menu option, such as open enrollment for insurance, only during the months of November and December
- Insert an emergency message into your application
- Update FAQs as new questions and answers become available
- Add or change recordings or switch to a new voice talent
- Make updates to routing rules, such as routing callers to a different group based on a holiday schedule
- Insert a customer survey at the beginning or end of the call flow to get information based on something your contact center analytics showed is happening with your callers
- Allocate the percent of callers that go to automated agents versus live agents based on factors such as time of day, traffic or some event going on in one of your contact centers
- Update speech recognition grammars on the fly
- Tune speech recognition performance.

On the other hand, the reality is that most vendors will make you feel as though upfront design, testing, and tuning is good enough. They need to finalize the installation of your system, and when they do, even minor changes throw you into the cash outlay vortex of application change.

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## Current Options for Change are Limited

You have at your fingertips a tremendous amount of information as to how well your contact center and self-service options are working. This includes enhanced analytics in the contact center to give granular information on what is happening that we might want to respond to, including the ability to mine recorded data to glean information about callers and caller behavior using speech analytics. You are the one that knows your business, and you know when you need to change. However, when it comes to making changes to the speech application itself, not a lot has been done to let a contact center manager make changes on the fly. Current options are limited. For example, the industry has long provided features that allow you to change call flows based on factors such as time of day, or day of week. Similarly, skills-based routing functionality, which has been around for decades, allows you to fine-tune the routing of specific callers to specific agents, and alter that routing as needed.

However, current options for fast change are limited and can be costly. For example, if you want to change the percent of calls that get allocated to different contact centers, your telecom provider will probably charge you a lot to make those changes. Making changes to your call flow can have similar results, and even a simple change, such as recording new prompts in your speech application is not simple or cheap.

With any type of change to your application you have several routes you can try. Let's look at the cost pros and cons to each:

### Speech Application Vendor

Going back to your speech application vendor for changes has the advantage of going back to the source for expertise. The speech vendors have speech scientists, VUI experts and VoiceXML developers on site. The downside is that it can be costly, and most of the time changes need to be scheduled in advance, which takes time.

Depending upon the complexity of the change you could be out some serious money. Changes run from an hourly rate of \$250-400 for voice talent just for recording prompts, to \$150-\$250 an hour or more for user interface designers and VoiceXML developers. That is, if you can get them quickly and just for a few hours. If you have anything more complex, not only do you have to schedule the change, it will cost you \$1500-2000 a day for a professional services engagement that would be required to change routing, add an application, or add an application leg. There is also the issue of scheduling. If they are simple changes, it's a crap shoot as to whether you can get it changed that day or have to wait. Typically there is a wait.

### Your IT Department

A second option is getting your IT department to make the change. If they are trained, then you have an avenue for speedy turnaround time if they are available. You still need to schedule them as you would your speech vendor's developers. Then there is always the issue of training. To turn your programmers into VoiceXML developers takes time and money, and a fight with everyone else demanding their resources. A typical mentoring engagement with a speech or

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IVR developer will run your \$1500-2000 a day. That is, if you don't send them to actual training classes on those vendors sites, which can run you thousands more.

Additionally, you could also train one of your business analysts to make changes too, but the costs and demands on their time would be similar.

### **VoiceXML Expert**

Another option, which provides you with staff on site to make changes, is to hire a VoiceXML developer. The benefit is that you have dedicated staff on site when you need to make changes, and you can make as many changes as you like. If you have frequently changing information for customers, such as rate quotes or stock information, this could save you money in the long run. However, a VoiceXML developer can run you \$55-75K just for salary alone.

## **Hope Is on the Horizon**

There is hope on the horizon. A trend is emerging that addresses the contact centers' need for control and flexibility over their speech application changes. We are beginning to see pockets of vendors adding tools to their speech applications to let contact center managers control change. Similar to the web paradigm where business users demanded powerful tools that did not require html programming skills, contact center managers are demanding tools that do not require voice user interface nor programming skills.

For example, some vendors provide tools to turn on and off messages remotely for seasonal announcements and other planned exceptions, which enable you to plan for exceptions to happen and then act on them without programming help. These tools provide the ability to drop in pre-recorded voice prompts. For example, a retailer will announce that stores are open longer during the Christmas shopping season.

A few vendors have addressed the problem by creating more powerful tools that enable the contact center manager to go further. These tools provide the ability to configure prompts to add emergency or seasonal messages and add or modify a recording on the fly, using either a new voice recording or text-to-speech for the voice prompt. For example, if an unexpected snowstorm has an airline's planes grounded, the contact center can insert an announcement at the beginning of their application to inform customers that all flights are delayed out of New York's JFK airport. Changes to a call flow to match business process changes can be made as well. For example if a healthcare provider needs to ask for two identifying pieces of information, rather than just one, in order to comply to a new HIPAA ruling, a question asking for the second piece of identification can be added. Additionally, call routing can be changed along with call flows. For example, if a healthcare provider adds a new service to answer Medicare questions, a new call routing destination can be added to send callers asking for Medicare information to a set of agents trained in Medicare options. Tuning to improve recognition, performance, or decrease call times can also be done. In this case the reporting of call paths becomes important so that the application can continually be adjusted and measured. These more powerful tools can also provide the management of changes with a testing

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environment and version control so that changes can be rolled back to previous versions if necessary, further giving control to the contact center manager.

The capability for contact center managers to make near real-time changes to their speech applications is a new trend. In order to find out how flexible you can be with change, you need to ask vendors a lot of questions.

## **When You Shop for a Speech Application This is What You Should Ask**

If you are shopping around for help in creating a speech application for you contact center, keep in mind that even the most rigorous design and testing of your application will not protect you from having to modify it over time, and nor should it. Since you want to be ahead of the curve in anticipating the needs of your customers, you should consider your speech application always as a work-in-progress. Therefore, ask prospective vendors these questions:

- How much customization and change can I make to the application myself?
- Do changes to my application require an application developer?
- Do you provide tools to change call routing or call flows that a contact center manager can use?
- If I use the tools myself am I safeguarded from damaging the application?
- How much training do your tools require?
- What level of testing do you do with these tools to ensure that the application works optimally after changes are made?
- How easy is it to change menu options in the speech application?
- How quickly can I make changes to the application – minutes, hours, days?
- Can I insert changes and turn them easily on and off, such as setting a holiday greeting?
- What kind of turnaround time will I have on changes if I don't do it myself?
- How much will it cost me for minor changes? Major changes?

## **Summary**

The bottom line is that your speech self-service applications need to change with your business. In order to adapt to change you need the control and flexibility to do it yourself, or do it in a timely fashion that won't break your budget. While you have the options of having your speech vendor, your IT department, or a full-time VoiceXML expert make those changes, you should inquire about a new breed of tools designed for contact center managers. These new tools will give you the flexibility to configure prompts, add recordings, change call flows and update call routing, on the fly and often within minutes.

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Most likely you wouldn't entertain any ideas of going to a third party or hiring extra personnel if you could simply do it yourself and it was easy. Most contact center managers would prefer to modify their applications the way that they make day-to-day operational changes based on work force management applications. Therefore, if you want to maintain flexibility and control, carefully check out what tools are available to you by carefully asking vendors how their tools can meet your needs.