

# Interactive Voice Response and You



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When I need to order a prescription refill I call the pharmacy and give my order. They tell me when it will be ready for pickup and ask me if that time is okay. If I want it before that time I tell them. I do this but I don't talk to a person. I talk to a computer that asks me questions such as: "Will there be anything else?"

This system, known as Interactive Voice Response or IVR has become an everyday occurrence in the telecom world. Think of IVR as a voice computer. Where a computer has a keyboard for entering information, an IVR uses remote touchtone telephones. Where a computer has a screen for showing the results, an IVR uses snippets of recordings of human voice or a synthesized voice (computerized voice). Recordings are used for repetitive messages, "Thanks for calling ABC Company. Push one for our sales department. Push two for our service department." Synthesized voice (also called Text-To-Speech) is used for reading information from files which contain information that can't be put into neat "sound bites," like numbers and dates, e.g. reading my incoming email. Whatever a computer can do, an IVR can too — from looking up airline schedules to moving calls around an automatic call distributor (ACD). The only limitation on an IVR is that you can't present as many alternatives on a phone as you can on a screen. The caller's brain simply won't remember more than a few. With IVR, you have to present the menus in smaller, cascading chunks.

The benefits of Interactive Voice Response are obvious. By automating the retrieval and processing of information by phone, you can

"give data a voice" and "add intelligence to the phone call." By doing that, you can put information to work. The classic IVR "killer app" takes an existing database (e.g., a magazine's article archives, a freight company's package-tracking system) and makes it available by phone (or other media, such as fax, e-mail, or DSVD — Digital Simultaneous Voice and Data). You can automate telephone-based tasks. From "bank by phone" to "find my package" to "sell me an airline ticket," to "validate my new credit card," IVR gives access to and takes in information; performs record-keeping, and makes sales, 24 hours a day — supplementing or standing in for human personnel. This results in cost reductions for personnel and allows customers to access information 24 hours a day - 7 days a week.

Businesses are currently using speech-enabled IVRs in the following ways: stock quotes and trading, package training, insurance claims, travel booking, pharmacy prescription refills, restaurant reservation information, banking, directory assistance, social services administration and delivery by government agencies. IVR has become so authentic people don't even realize they are talking to a computer.

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