



Best Practices to Increase Effectiveness of Voice Self-Service

By John Ragsdale, VP of Research, SSPA

May's **Topic of the Month** for SSPA Research is voice self-service. When asked in **last month's issue of the SSPA News** what research title you would most like to see this month, the winner with 55% of the vote was "Best Practices to Increase Effectiveness of Voice Self-Service."

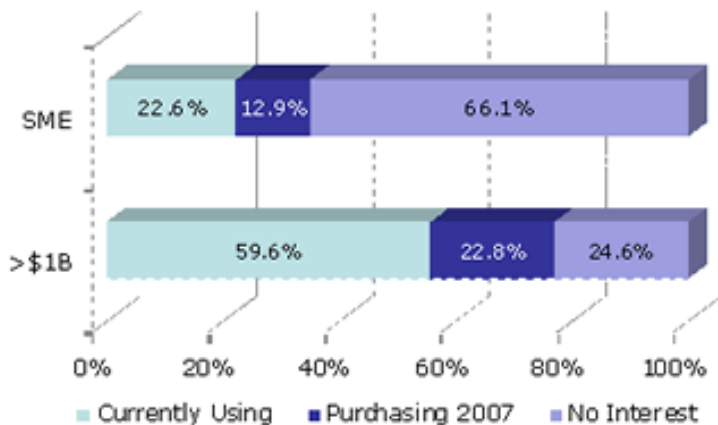
According to the latest SSPA Benchmark data, 54.8% of all incidents, on average, are opened via the phone channel, making this channel an obvious target for additional self-service options. As seen in Figure 1, adoption of voice self-service is fairly high among larger members, with 59.6% of >\$1B companies currently using voice self-service, and an additional 22.8% shopping for technology this year. As expected for this complex technology, which historically has been a high ticket item, adoption by SME (small to medium sized enterprise) members is lower, with only 22.6% of SME members currently using voice self-service, and 12.9% planning to make an investment in 2007.

Figure 1: SSPA Member Adoption of Voice Self-Service

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SSPA Member Adoption of Voice Self-Service



Source: SSPA ITP Survey, September, 2006

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Unfortunately, voice self-service is hated by many customers, and frankly, who can blame them? Companies have long used interactive voice response (IVR) as a means of keeping customers away from live agents, with the term “IVR jail” commonly used to reflect the typical experience of being stuck in a maze of options, none of which apply to the caller’s question. In fact, at least one website has become extremely well known for offering a list of customer support phone numbers for hundreds of companies along with instructions for how to bypass the IVR and reach a live agent: [Paul English’s gethuman 500 database](#).

How can IVR and voice-self service technology be deployed to better meet the needs of customers, encourage customer adoption, and ultimately become a more effective channel for support? SSPA Research has identified three common problems at the root of today’s IVR dysfunction:

- **Implement and ignore.** Just like Web self-service, the work is not over when the project goes live. Too many companies seem to launch an IVR or enhanced voice self-service without ongoing reporting and analysis to identify the paths customers are taking, where they seem to bog down or break out of the system to speak with an agent, and what common questions are being asked that aren’t addressed by the system. Ongoing usability testing and fine tuning of call trees is required.
- **Deflect, not solve.** Many consumer facing IVRs seem solely designed to prevent access to agents, not solve customer problems. No wonder customers dislike and distrust voice options: their question is seldomed addressed by menu options, and getting to a live agent is all but impossible. Organize self-service content in ways that make sense from the customer perspective, not the company perspective, and if you don’t have advanced speech technology and rely solely on IVR trees, limit your menu

options and offer a choice for live assistance.

- **Standalone voice implementations.** Customers who have entered an account number in the IVR multiple times, only to be asked for the information again when reaching an agent, are justified in their frustration. Voice self-service should be integrated to the telephony platform, as well as the CRM or other system used for entitlement, with 'meaty' screen pops to agents containing as much information as possible. Additionally, integrations to other systems (billing, order, inventory) will allow a wider range of questions to be answered.

Beyond the IVR: "Hello, how may I help you today?"

The single biggest deflection point in voice technology is the creation and adoption of technology standards for voice, primarily XML and Voice XML (VXML). Gone are the days when the only voice applications were 'black box' systems coupled with the telephony switch. With XML and Web services changing how applications are deployed and integrated, VXML has opened up many new possibilities for voice self-service, including:

- **The proliferation of specialists.** No longer confined to whatever voice options your telephony vendor provides, today's voice vendor landscape includes multiple players of speech recognition (with Nuance dominating the market), and a whole new market for speech application vendors including TuVox, Resolvity and Voxify.
- **Ease of integration.** With VXML, tying together multiple systems is not only possible, it is no longer a year long project involving a team of speech scientists. Any XML/Web services compatible CRM, ERP or billing system can be directly integrated to speech systems, opening up a whole new array of information available to customers via voice. And, with deeper integration to the telephony system and agent desktop applications, screen pops announcing customers can provide much more information, saving time on the call. For companies wanting a 'soup to nuts' solution, RightNow Technologies offer voice self-service fully integrated with their customer service suite, allowing customers to search the knowledgebase and even open and update support tickets via voice.
- **Menu-less voice self-service.** The nirvana for voice self-service is to have an automated agent greet the customer and ask, "How may I help you?" While we may not quite be there yet, there are a lot of possibilities now for voice self-service beyond the IVR tree. Stay tuned later this month for an SSPA research report discussing the various voice technologies; how IVRs, speech recognition, and speech applications fit together; and what the more innovative vendors are offering.

The SSPA Recommends

The last five years has seen complete overhauls of most company's Web self-service sites and underlying technology, offering a wider range of search options, personalized content and offers, intelligent diagnostics that leverage customer profile data, **microsites**, click to chat, click to call, Web chat and collaboration, etc. But the voice channel, where the majority of customer issues still originate, seems mired down in clunky 1990s technology. Here are some recommendations to get your voice implementation up to date and ready for the future:

- **Embrace standards.** This is the single biggest step your company can take in order to benefit from the new technology available: upgrade to a VXML platform. Using older platforms makes adding additional voice options costly, and integrating to additional ancillary systems is nearly impossible.
- **Leverage flexible voice options.** Voice self-service doesn't have to force customers through multiple menus, with assisted service the final 'bail out.' Newer systems offer flexibility. For example, Resolvity can prompt customers in queue, "The expected wait time for an agent is 5 minutes. Would you like to try our voice self-service? You will retain your place in the call queue."
- **Take advantage of new pricing models.** The advent of software as a service (SaaS) or hosted applications means the cost structure of new voice deals is changing. This is great news for companies who don't want to pay upfront for a new system, and for mid-market companies whose budgets don't allow a huge onsite implementation. Again, look to Resolvity and RightNow for an innovative approach: "pay per use." You only pay for the actual use of the voice self-service sessions (either by number of sessions or by the minute), meaning you don't have to cough up funds for hundreds or thousands of concurrent user licenses which may never be used.

About John Ragsdale.....

John Ragsdale is Vice President of Research for the SSPA. Ragsdale spent 10 years managing tech support operations before moving to Silicon Valley where he held product management and marketing positions at eService and CRM vendors. He spent 5 years at Forrester Research as VP and Research Director before joining the SSPA.

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