

It's a
Persona,
Not a
personality

**In IVR design, it should be about finding the right voice,
not the right character.**

BY LEONARD KLIE





IN THE EARLY PART OF THIS DECADE, a great many companies spent months and millions of dollars trying to make their interactive voice response (IVR) systems more “personable.” They created fictional characters—complete with their own names, identities, interests, and personal histories—to serve as their corporate voices.

These cybernetic consumer service operators, with catchy names like Claire and Simone, captured the attention not only of customers, but also of speech industry watchdogs who touted them as the latest and greatest way to make a cold, impersonal interaction with a computerized system more personal. These really well-put-together software models were just what the industry needed to replace the cold, synthetic-sounding robotic voices that previously told callers which buttons on their phones to push.

The problem was that “some companies overdid it, trying to make it sound like a conversation with a real person,” says Jim Milroy, director of creative services at West Interactive, a voice self-service solutions provider. “It’s just silly because everyone knows it’s not a real person.”

Customers calling in with a problem on their bill don’t care that the “person” on the other end of the phone is a 30-year-old, blonde housewife with a master’s degree in healthcare, he argues. Moreover, “the catch phrases became comical and the responses became canned, not natural,” all of which have contributed to all the bad things people heard about IVRs.

Julie, the character launched in May 2002 as the voice behind Amtrak’s toll-free 1-800-USA-RAIL automated phone line for checking train schedules, ticket prices, or reservations, was even lampooned in a skit on NBC’s “Saturday Night Live” not too long ago, despite the fact that her warm and pleasant-sounding voice greets each of Amtrak’s 22 million calls a year with the simple words “Hi. This is Amtrak. I’m Julie.”

As is the case with Julie and a number of other popular IVR characters, including Virgin Mobile USA’s Simone, Sprint’s Claire (which has since been discontinued), and Bell Canada’s Emily (which it launched in 2003 for its 310-BELL customer service line at a \$10 million price tag), “the callers are talking to a machine, and they know they’re talking to a machine,” adds Mark Manz of Worldly Voices, a voice prompt recording service provider.

“People calling into an IVR want to get to their goal quickly. They are not calling to establish a relationship. A pleasant, professional-sounding voice reading a well-written script on an efficiently structured IVR is what callers expect,” Manz says.

They don’t need to know, or even care, that Emily is a native of Fredericton, New Brunswick, with a bachelor’s degree from Carleton University who enjoys listening to live music in her free time, Manz and many others contend.

Another inherent problem with creating this personality is that it gives customers something to latch onto when things go wrong in the system. And that personality becomes a negative reflection on the entire company, not just the IVR.

Look Who’s Talking

So how did the industry reach the point that IVRs became almost too human?

“When we first started talking about personae, about six years ago, it was the wrong people talking,” West Interactive’s Milroy recalls. “There were too many people looking at the IVR as a flowchart, and something that may make sense on paper will not necessarily make sense in real interactions with people.”

All too often, the decision was left to the marketing/advertising or the IT departments. “The biggest use for these personae is from a marketing perspective, not a caller perspective. People on the marketing side like the potential, but callers are not calling in to play or make friends with an application,” says Caroline Leathem, head of consulting at Fluency Voice Technology. “The people who made those decisions tend to view things from an advertising perspective, and it’s not really the same for the call center. It’s a different conversation people are having [with an IVR], and there’s a different expectation from the call.”

But, people within the speech industry let outside forces convince them that they needed these cutesy personae, she maintains. They listened to the psychologists and sociologists who theorized early on that humans need a little charm, compassion, and personality on the other end of the phone when they call to get information, pay their bills, or check their account balances.

“People have made VUI design out to be a black art, made it more complicated than it really is or needs to be,” Leathem says.



People calling into an IVR want to get to their goal quickly. They are not calling to establish a relationship.

In some cases, it may be that the company's executives put something in place and walked away after the go-live so they couldn't see how bad it was. In almost every case, though, you can be sure that leaders were lured in by the promise of saving huge amounts of cash in the long run. Despite the up-front costs, deploying an automated system is typically at least 20 percent cheaper than employing a live agent, and the IVR doesn't need health insurance, time off, overtime pay, or even a desk for that matter.

While the call center and IVR is not likely to disappear any time soon, the industry tide toward personae is changing, and a growing number of VUI and IVR designers now go to great lengths to make voice applications that are really about the voice and the tone, not a personality, for their clients.

"The goal is not to give it a name, but to address the way that it handles the call," says Mike Ahneman, senior VUI designer at Intervice. "It's really about the quality of service that it provides, and customers will base their impressions of the company on that."

"It's the user experience that dictates what your customers will think about you as a company. The IVR sets a tone for the company, just like a Web site or advertising," adds Marie Jackson, Intervice's senior vice president of global marketing. "The voice portal, Web, and advertising personae have to come back to the tone of the company and how it wants to project itself. A persona is not a name but an overall tone."

That is why Intervice, she notes, "spends a lot of time up front with its customers to determine what their customers want from the system and to make voice prompts that reflect what those customers want to do. We align the business and customer objectives and do a rigorous discovery process first."

"We speak to the business owners first to get their idea of what their customers want, and then we go into the system and listen to live calls to develop a pretty good picture of who the callers are, how well they understand the technology, and how they interact with the system. That influences very much how we design a system," Ahneman adds.

Caller expectations are also the governing factor in Fluency's work with customers seeking help with an IVR rollout. "You have to match the application's domain with the application's callers," Leathem says.

VUI designers also need to look at a company's demographics, geography, employees, and corporate image before branding out a voice or persona, she advises.

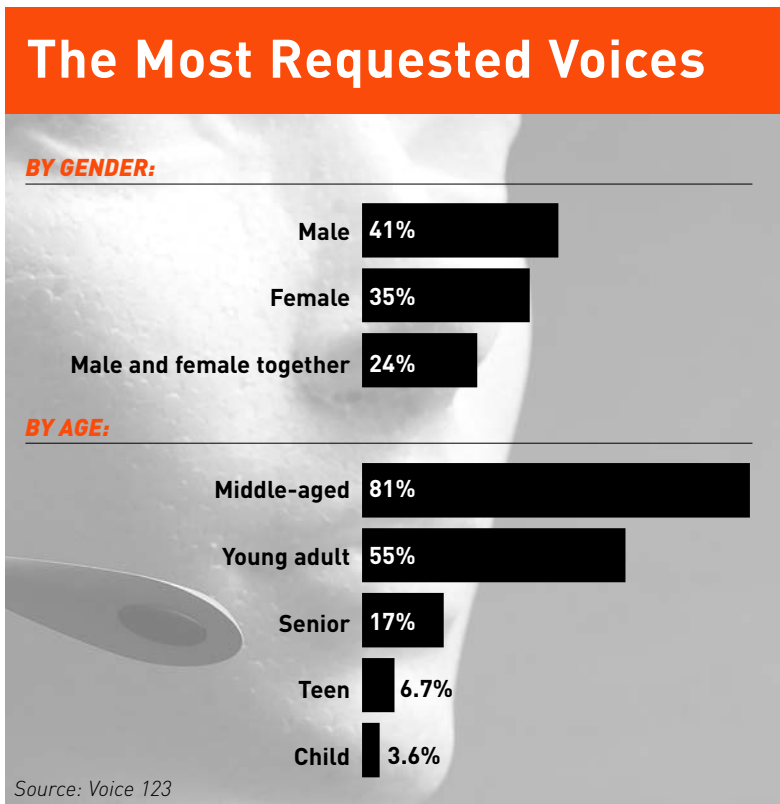
"We work with the customer to find out where the company is going, who its customers are, and what's the face of that customer," West Interactive's Milroy says.

Putting the Voice in IVR

Companies like Fluency, Intervice, and West Interactive are also turning more to voice talents as a way to match the IVR voice with the right corporate image. "We're starting to see more of a talent to the persona, done with real voice actors," Milroy says.

So one question Milroy asks customers before designing an IVR for them is: If you had an unlimited budget, and could pick one celebrity to be the voice of the company, who would it be?

As an IVR designer, it then becomes his job to find the talent or to find the right people to find





“The goal is not to give it a name, but to address the way that it handles the call.”

the talent. When finding the right voice, Milroy says, it's perfectly fine to work up a character profile for the IVR persona, taking into account things like the age, accent, gender, and intensity that the voice talent should project. “But, I don't need to know that she likes gardening or what her family background is.”

Fluency takes the same approach. “We do create a profile for the voice, but it's more to help the voice talent create the right tone and voice needed. It's not done for the caller,” Leathem explains.

Once that's done, Fluency puts the profile before a committee to determine which voice type would work, and then reaches out to prospective voice talents to match it. “If the voice is right, the customer will say that the IVR worked well,” Leathem says.

But there are a lot of other things to consider beside the voice, VUI design experts say.

“The voice is just one part of the overall persona. The prompts, dialogues, etc., all have to match the voice. You even have to look at the on-hold,” Leathem says.

“It's all about how you use the voice in the best and most natural way,” Intervoice's Jackson says. “You can't look at a persona as a stand-alone piece. It's a combination of the prompts, the voice you choose, the tone, etc.”

“Initially selecting a recording studio with a track record of more than a million voice prompts produced, that only deals with voice prompt recording, and has spent years training voice talents will greatly increase the system's success,” Manz offers.

But not every company has the kinds of resources needed for that level of detail when it comes to their IVRs. Many others may not need a system with that level of sophistication and could do quite well with a basic call routing and voicemail system that does not require a lot of caller interaction. Not to worry, Leathem says.

“It's unrealistic to expect a lot of the smaller firms to invest a lot of money in voice talents, studios, and VUI design,” she says. “For them, it's better to train them on how to set up the recording environment and to design appropriate prompts.”

Most VUI designers, though, have not fully admitted that personae with a personality are a bad thing, as long

as they stay within some boundaries. “I certainly don't think previous persona work is all bad. It doesn't have to be over the top or have a name, but that does color the whole interaction,” says Intervoice's Ahneman.

“Naming a persona, giving it hobbies, etc., is fine. For a company with a lot of repeat callers, there's an opportunity to do more with designs. You can get more personal,” adds David Pelland, director of collaborative design at Intervoice.

“It may be all right for people calling into a video game maker, for example, where they want to be entertained, but for something like banking, people just want to check their balances and move on,” Fluency's Leathem says.

Warm Body vs. Cold Computer

The bottom line for most consumers, though, is that despite enormous investments by the companies that are trying to get—or keep—their business, they would rather talk to a warm body than a cold computer. Many have expressed anger at a cold computer that is pretending to be anything but. An entire blog, for example, has been devoted to complaints about Virgin Mobile USA's Simone character.

“What makes it so odd is not just that they try to make it sound like Simone is a real person. It isn't even that they try to make Simone a clear and vivid character. It's that they go through all this effort, then make it transparently apparent that Simone is simply a computer program,” one frustrated blogger wrote.

“It's always her, and she always says the same lines the same way. I guess it's a little more friendly and distinctive than the standard ‘PLEASE. ENTER. YOUR. TEN. DIGIT. CODE. NOW? bit, but it's disorienting. Is this somebody's attempt to seem ‘hip’ or what?” asked another.

For many customers, though, a little personality, even if it's misplaced, is better than none at all. One writer on a blog devoted to Bell Canada's Emily penned the following: “She may be annoying, but she's a far sight better than the 50 different phone numbers all leading to different touchtone menus that Bell had before. No matter how much we might want it, they're just not going to hire enough real, live people to answer all those calls.” ☒