

“ HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF PROFESSIONAL VOICE TALENT SERVICES



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This white paper is intended for project management professionals who are directly responsible for the development and implementation of comprehensive Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and/or Auto Attendant (AA) systems. Our intent is to provide a set of principles for working constructively with professional voice service providers that provide pre-recorded prompts and messages for these systems – from understanding the criteria to be employed for selecting voice talent, through script development and recording, to ongoing maintenance of these recordings over time.

WHY PROFESSIONAL VOICE SERVICES?

The decision to contract for professional voice services should be considered in light of the alternative: recording voice prompts using internal resources. It is often the case that a company's first foray into interactive voice response or auto attendant systems includes a gallant attempt by untrained internal resources to record the voice prompts. As the applications grow with the business, a number of nasty issues raise their ugly heads:

Resource Availability: The rate of employee turnover and organizational restructuring has accelerated significantly over the last decade. When the long-time “voice of the company” is transferred, promoted, terminated, or quits, the company is faced with an uncomfortable dilemma: use a second voice to pick up any voice prompt additions or modifications, or re-record all voice prompts with a new voice. The former will inevitable result in a disjointed voice user interface, which reflects poorly on the company's brand. The latter is costly and time-consuming. Furthermore, if a second internal resource is employed, the company could be faced with this dilemma yet again.

Lack of Professional Voice Training: More significantly, it is near impossible for even the most well-intentioned and talented internal resource to replicate the results of a trained professional voice talent whose makes his/her living at this craft. Professional voice talents are adept at controlling the variables that need to be actively managed to produce a consistent, high quality set of voice prompts: volume, pace, pronunciation, and articulation for sure – but also subtleties of style, tone, and inflection; all key ingredients for an impactful voice brand. They are particularly attuned to accurately replicating these elements over the life of a system. This is a critical skill – as any variation of a prompt re-recorded in 2013 for a system originally set up in 2006 would be immediately noticeable to the caller. Also, professional voice talents know how to tailor each word to enable smooth concatenation of multiple prompts – so any prompt that is added or modified can be dropped into a voice-enabled application without compromising the original integrity of the original recording session.

Administrative Challenges: Using internal employees for the development and management of pre-recorded prompts and messages diverts these resources from their core responsibilities. Furthermore, once multiple locations, platforms, and languages are introduced into the equation, coordinating schedules and deadlines across hundreds or thousands of recordings becomes unmanageable as a part-time endeavor.



CHOOSING AND WORKING WITH PROFESSIONAL VOICE TALENTS

While contracting with a professional voice talent eliminates the issues described above, ultimate success is a function of key strategic choices and how well the company manages the process – from voice selection to final delivery. We offer the following **5-step** framework for maximizing your investment in these services:

- 1 Finding the right professional voice services
- 2 Establishing the brand
- 3 Choosing the talent
- 4 Leveraging branded voice over multiple applications
- 5 Managing the process to maximize successes



1. FINDING THE RIGHT PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Our assertion is that the development and maintenance of professional voice prompts and messages is a long-term investment – given that the chief objectives here are company brand reinforcement and the continual improvement of the customer/caller experience over time. As such, strong consideration should be given to contracting with a full-service professional voice services firm. To be considered “full-service”, a firm should directly employ full time production and customer service staff. The firm should also offer a broad range of voice talents across multiple styles and languages. And, the firm should provide all the services required to develop, record, edit, and maintain voice recordings over the life of a given system. These services include:

- 1 **Script development and review:** Full service firms employ in-house expertise in writing and reviewing IVR and auto attendant scripts. Oftentimes, these firms bring on copywriters with backgrounds in radio or similar media, for which the ability to craft powerful messaging without relying on visual aids is required. These individuals are trained to spot call flow inconsistencies, awkward or misleading phrasing, and a variety of script errors. To the extent that promotional messages are a component of the voice solution, it is important that the specific characteristics of the telephone as the delivery vehicle are taken into account.
- 2 **Audio editing and engineering:** These firms employ sound engineers that can manipulate the many variables that form the foundation for a high-quality voice recording. They are expert in:
 - Removing unwanted breaths, spaces, and extraneous noises.
 - Tailoring the “heads” and “tails” of files to enable smooth connecting, or “concatenation” of individual voice files contained within a call flow.
 - Attaining the appropriate volume level and maintaining its consistency.
 - Integrating voice with music or other audio or visual elements – including fading in/out music at the start and end of voice messages as well as synchronizing recordings with video, animations, and other graphic/visual presentations.
 - Providing and/or converting files into the format appropriate to specific telecommunication or audio equipment.

- 3 **File naming:** Large IVR applications with high prompt counts in particular require proactive and consistent management of file organization and naming conventions. Full service firms employ best practices and technical algorithms for streamlining processes relating to these challenges – both reducing costs and eliminating naming and location errors. If the voice recordings are managed by IVR developers or call center service providers on behalf of large organizations, particular care must be paid to ensuring that errors are not introduced as voice files are handled by multiple parties.
- 4 **Proofing/validation:** The Internet is chock full of “voice brokers”, many of whom merely act as matchmakers between a long list of unvetted voices and prospective voice buyers. By contrast, full service professional voice services firms employ their production personnel to independently proof and validate the work of their voice talents – looking for inaccuracies and inconsistencies as compared to the defined scripts and other requirements defined by the customer. This level of quality control results in an end product that is error-free and of the utmost professional quality.
- 5 **Language translation:** Oftentimes, IVR and AA systems are required to serve customers spanning multiple regions, or are global in nature. In addition to providing voices in multiple languages, full service firms often provide language translation services. It is advantageous to have a single point of accountability for ensuring that scripts provided in one language are accurately translated for recording in all target languages. A voice talent and a translator who have worked together over time will more effectively work through potential misinterpretations in meaning and style. Plus, having one firm as the accountable party ensures a quality final product.

Having a full complement of these services is particularly crucial for third party firms who provide outsourced services on behalf of their clients, such as IVR development firms, call center service providers, telecommunications system integrators, and other managed services providers. Large, multi-national corporations in particular have stringent quality and accuracy requirements – often applied across many regions requiring multiple languages – and their reputations are tied to the performance of their partners. Full services firms provide the breadth of experience and process rigor needed to handle large projects and the ability to quickly turn around voice prompt updates at scale – which is beyond the capabilities of most voice brokers and independent contractors.

OTHER CRITERIA FOR VOICE FIRM SELECTION

In addition to the breadth of services a professional voice services firm provides, it is important to evaluate key characteristics of the firm and its resources:

Firm assets: We’ve already talked about the importance of long-term availability of voice talent, but this also applies to the chosen voice services firm as well. Factors such as how long the firm has been in business, total number of customers, and market presence with large, high profile customers provide clues as to the long-term financial stability of the firm.



Breadth of product line: Companies who are able to leverage a single voice talent across multiple applications and customer touch points will be best positioned to establish a consistent brand and image. A good full service voice firm typically offers a broad set of telephony applications (IVR Auto Attendant, Message-On-Hold), and also offers those same talents for other services – such as narration, voice-enabled web-based sales and marketing tools such as web videos and PowerPoint or Flash applications, as well as e-learning platforms. Also, multi-national corporations generally require that prompts and messages be recorded in multiple languages. Your chosen firm should have multiple options for English, Spanish, and French, as well as bi-lingual voice talents who can speak two languages and be perceived as a native speaker in both. Ideally, the firm should offer translation services using resources certified by the American Translators Association to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Voice Talents: Not only must the firm's voice talent produce great sound recordings, they must be available to customers over the entire life span of the IVR or AA system. So when evaluating the voice talent roster of a full-service firm, ask the following questions:

- How long on average have the voice talents been with the firm?
- What policies and processes has the firm put into place to ensure voice talent quality and longevity?
- What guarantees are provided by the firm in the event that a voice talent becomes unavailable? Some best practices in this area:
 - **Vacation notifications:** If a voice talent goes on vacation, the firm will notify their customers well in advance so they can make the adjustments necessary to ensure that project deadlines are met.
 - **Voice talent illness:** In the event that a voice talent's voice becomes compromised due to illness and their prompts are nonetheless required to be recorded within a certain time frame to meet a critical deadline, the firm will arrange to have prompts recorded immediately and then later re-recorded at no charge when the voice talent recovers.
 - **Voice talent guarantee:** Some firms will offer to re-record voice prompts at a significant discount within a certain time period in the event that the chosen voice talent becomes unavailable.

One important note regarding voice talent rosters: The ability to deliver quality voice work is not necessarily a function of how many voice talents they have available. A firm should offer enough voice talents to span multiple styles and personalities - as well as multiple options for the languages you require. However, a voice firm that just lists as many voice talents on their website as they can sign up may not be making the necessary commitment to each voice talent. If a voice firm hires too many voice talents, they may be unable to provide enough work to keep each voice talent engaged and interested over the long term.

Also, the best firms have core voice talents who have spent years working closely with the firm's audio engineering and customer service staff and have become familiar with that firm's production processes. The voice talent is then more likely to continue their relationship with the firm over time – which fosters the long-term continuous improvement that results in higher recording quality/accuracy and assured voice availability over time.

Staff profile: Quality and timeliness of voice work are functions of both the tenure and professional background of key production staff. Since coordination among production, customer service, and sales is paramount in delivering good work on time, you should get a sense of how long the key managers have been with the firm as part of your due diligence process.



The firm should employ full time management dedicated to production editing – as opposed to leaving the oversight of this essential task strictly to voice talents. The production staff should have formal training in audio engineering and be highly proficient with audio editing tools such as Adobe Audition, Avid ProTools, or Sony SoundForge.

Customer Service: A professional voice services should have a dedicated customer service staff whose sole purpose is to coordinate all resources of the firm to meet customer expectations relating to quality and on-time delivery. The firm should:

- Have specific policies regarding lead time so that expectations are aligned.
- Take a proactive approach to identifying potential issues when the script is originally submitted.
- Ensure that the customer's file naming conventions are accurately followed in the prompt labeling process. Be willing to correct any discrepancies between the customer's original script and the recorded prompts/messages
- Include a satisfaction guarantee mandating a full refund if the customer is not completely satisfied.
- Archive all files such that any and all prompts/messages can be quickly retrieved.

It should be noted that these capabilities are particularly important for large organizations with multiple location and language requirements – as well as third party IVR developers or call center firms that service them.

These organizations often require large amounts of frequent changes, requiring a keen focus on process quality and repeatability. Here it is important to check multiple large company references.

2. ESTABLISHING THE BRAND

The first time a caller picks up the phone and interacts with a voice talent in a call center environment may represent that customer's first contact with a company. Depending on the industry, that recorded voice may well be the primary touch point for a great number of a company's customers over time. Such is the case with companies in many sectors: financial services (automated banking and stock quote applications), travel (airline reservation systems), and utilities (outage reporting). Therefore, it is critical that the style, tone, choice of language, and personality associated with that voice consistently reinforces a company's brand. To accomplish this, direct conversation should be arranged with a voice services firm representative, and/or directly with the voice talent if possible, to discuss:

- Company/product strategy
- Primary elements of the marketing/promotional mix (TV, radio, and print advertising, web-based marketing, direct mail, etc.)
- Target market or persona to which the company is trying to appeal
- Brand image to be reinforced
- Emotion the company wishes to elicit

Many of the best voice talents are, in reality, actors and actresses who can create different kinds of personas, and view such conversations as an opportunity to fully utilize their professional skills. The more your chosen voice talent knows about the topics above, the more able she/he will be to integrate voice into a consistent brand strategy. In addition, most full-service voice services firms employ copywriters who have worked in radio or similar media, and are intimately familiar with the subtleties in language and style that can make voice messages more impactful.

3. CHOOSING THE TALENT

Picking the right voice talent involves considering both high subjective factors as well as objective criteria associated with his/her experience and specific skill set. As discussed above, the match between voice and brand should drive the choice, but it is still at the end of the day largely a matter of gut instinct. Some key questions to ask:

- Can you envision the caller and the voice talent naturally “connecting” in a face-to-face conversation?
- Would the caller “trust” the persona created by the voice with a key decision about a major purchase?
- Would the caller feel comfortable providing sometimes personal information to that persona (e.g., to a financial services firm or medical billing company)?

Beyond subjective factors, it is entirely appropriate to ask about the specific questions about what experience or skill set the voice talent brings to the brand. As discussed, assuming the voice talent is employed by or otherwise aligned with a professional voice services firm, tenure with the firm is a key factor.

For all languages, it is critical that the voice talent not only be a native speaker of a given language, but also of a specific region or dialect as well. A voice talent whose primary language is Latin American Spanish will not come off as authentic speaking Castilian Spanish. Also, ask the voice firm if they work with bilingual voice talents who are able to, for example, speak both English and French without an accent. Having recordings for two languages developed in one voice is less costly, and more importantly, results in a pleasant seamless experience for the caller, as it has the advantage of being able to serve both target audiences within the same call flow.

Finally, a potentially obvious and often disregarded piece of advice: listen to a lot of voice demos. The selection of a voice talent has a strong subjective element; it is important that your organization is comfortable and excited about the voice that will be chosen to represent your brand. You should take some time to explore the full range of style and tone from a large pool of options. In fact, many customers use the selection process as an opportunity to build consensus around the most appropriate choice, and will sometimes conduct a brainstorming session, then vote on the final selection.

4. LEVERAGING A BRANDED VOICE OVER MULTIPLE APPLICATIONS

Think of the most successful and memorable brands in the consumer marketing world. Coca-Cola. McDonald's. Disney. Nike. No matter the medium (TV, radio, Internet, print ad), no matter the region, no matter the personalities features promoting the brand, there is a consistency and repetitiveness that constantly reinforces the message and affixes the brand in the mind of the consumer. The voice component of your brand is no exception to this rule. A branded voice will be heard by customers through a multitude of vehicles throughout the buying and support lifecycle:

- Dialing into a call center for service: **Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Systems**
- Waiting on hold for a sales or support representative: **Messages-On-Hold**
- Browsing through product information on the Internet: **Voice-Enabled Web Audio**, such as animated product presentations, for example.
- Evaluating a product: **Voice Narration** for a PowerPoint or Flash presentation
- Being trained to use the company's products or services: **E-Learning**

Using the same voice “platform” as a unifying theme across all of these applications is an essential marketing best practice. These multiple customer touch points represent opportunities to reinforce the brand with a single voice, with the same familiar and memorable personality. Over time, this repetition improves aided and unaided recall and strengthens the customer relationship. In addition, working with one voice talent enables the company to achieve cost and learning curve efficiencies; training and deploying only one resource eliminates duplication of onboarding, coaching, feedback, and coordination efforts. In addition, voice files can sometimes be repurposed, further reducing costs. For example, promotional messages playing over music while a customer is on hold can be reused on a company website.

5. MANAGING THE PROCESS TO MAXIMIZE SUCCESS

From choosing the voice talent through the initial recording session and beyond, it is up to the company to manage the voice prompt development process in a way that gets the most of its investment. Here are some best practices:

Ask for a custom demo: Most voice talents can be heard on a voice services firm’s website, but many voice talents will be happy to record a small snippet of the customer’s actual script so that the voice can be evaluated in its real-world context. This try-and-buy approach ensures that there is a strong brand personality match.

Ask for alternative prompts: Many voice services firms will be willing to provide multiple instances of the same prompts if the company points out pronunciations that might be difficult to replicate or phrases for which emphasizing certain words or inflections might be tricky. This precludes the need to re-record voice prompts.

Request a coaching session: Technology now exists for a company to be actively involved in guiding a voice talent through how they would like their prompts recorded and to provide real-time feedback during the actual coaching session. Often times, the company has contracted with a third party IVR designer or outsourced call center service, who can be involved in such sessions. The direct nature of these sessions minimizes the risk of misinterpretation due to faulty hand-offs and creates an environment where mistakes can more readily be identified. Just as importantly, this practice ensures that the brand will be most effectively represented in the final recording.

Use a “Pronunciation Hotline”: Oftentimes, the implementer of an IVR or AA project can provide audio pronunciations by calling into a special hotline or voice mailbox provided by a voice service firm. There are occasions when written pronunciations might prove to be insufficient for voice talent accuracy; for example, a difficult-to-say last name or the name of a new pharmaceutical product. Providing a spoken pronunciation of these words can prevent the need for additional discussion or re-recording by the voice talent.

Record short prompts with different inflections: Voice service firms often recommend that prompts be recorded multiple times – using rising, falling or neutral inflections at the end of selected phrases. This ensures that prompts can be placed with a dialog in a way that sounds natural and conversational and be smoothly integrated into the call flow. For example, a rising inflection is appropriate if the intent is to ask a question; a falling inflection is used to end a sentence; and a medial inflection is used for letters or phrases that occur in the middle of a sentence, or are to be concatenated.

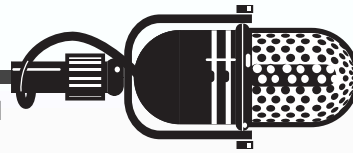


In general many professional voice talent firms will be more than happy to accommodate unique requests if the suggested approach improves the quality of the recording, so you should not be shy about making your wishes known.

CONCLUSION

Employing professional voice services for your IVR or Auto Attendant prompts and messages will enhance your brand by providing a clearly defined, great sounding marketing persona for your organization. Knowing what to look for when evaluating these services will help narrow the field to find the provider with whom your company can enjoy a long and beneficial relationship. Once you've made your selection, following the principles above throughout the entire system lifecycle will ensure that your organization provides the best possible experience for your callers.

MarketingMessages®



Marketing Messages is a full service provider of professionally recorded voice prompts, messages, and narration for call center and web-based applications. Our customers employ Voice Branding™ to build brand identity, improve the caller experience, and make their websites more compelling. We offer services for interactive voice response (IVR), auto attendant, music-on-hold, Messages-On-Hold™, E-Learning, and narration for websites, sales presentations and demonstrations, and other voice-enabled applications in over 50 languages. Since its inception in 1984, Marketing Messages has provided top quality voice artists spanning over 50 languages, highly accurate scripting and editing, and rapid voice file turnaround to over 3,700 customers – including over 200 Fortune 500 companies.



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