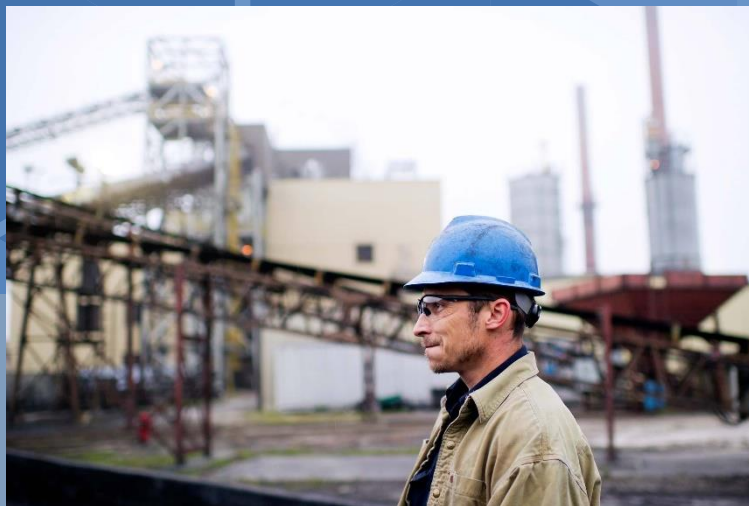


The Essential Guide to Voice Recording in the Energy Industry

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Introduction

Million upon millions of consumers from all walks of life have always relied on energy, gas, and water utilities to provide affordable services in a safe and cost effective manner. What has changed in recent years is the heightened expectations consumers and other energy company stakeholders have with respect to how information technology is deployed to serve their diverse needs.

While the Internet has played an increasingly important vehicle in providing information to consumers, phone-based systems remain an important, but underused, channel of communication. The ability of these systems to satisfy customer needs are a function of how effectively the “voice user interface” is in not only providing key information, but creating a sense of comfort, confidence, and familiarity with a broad group of energy stakeholders.



This E-book has been created for both business and technical professionals at electric, gas, and water companies who have been entrusted with providing a positive, branded customer experience through the medium of the telephone. For the purposes of this E-Book, we define the “customer” as the end consumers of energy, as well as any other internal and external stakeholder of the serving organization.

While the focus of this E-book is on utility companies (we include water utilities in this category despite

employing the term “energy” throughout), the concepts and applications discussed within are broadly applicable to the energy at large.

Our primary focus will be on energy/utility industry-specific uses of interactive voice response applications (IVR), and more specifically, the positive impact that professionally-recorded voice prompts can make on the customer experience. Examples of IVR applications include systems that guide customers through transactions and impart information relating to account/billing information, outage reporting, power restoration, resource scheduling, and consumer energy programs.

Our belief is that the “prompts” acting as the guide through IVR systems are most effectively created by professional “voice talents”. These voice talents are trained to record prompts in a consistent and polished manner, with a style, pace, and tone that appeals to specific utility customer segments. The goal is to create a sense of comfort, confidence, and familiarity with callers –and project a professional image to all utility company stakeholders. In addition, many professional voice services firms offer voice talents in a variety of different languages and dialects, enabling utility companies to effectively provide critical energy information to a wider variety of consumers.

Let’s start with the current trends relevant to the customer information imperative, and then move from there to specific applications - focusing on the potential impact and value of professional voice prompts.



Technology employed by the utility industry is constantly changing, and the systems and services related to telephony are no exception. In recent years, using professional voice talents for recording IVR prompts has been a growing best practice, and how they are being used is constantly expanding. This growth is in response to a number of business trends in the energy sector:

Current Trends

Customers are taking a more active role in managing their own information

Customers are no longer waiting for their bill to arrive in the mail or for the lights to come back on after a power outage. They actively seek out data pertaining to usage and payment information, time estimates for power restoration, and information on energy efficiency and rebate programs. While much focus has been placed on the Internet as a primary channel for this information, broad segments of the general population still prefer the telephone as their primary communication method.

Utilities are focusing on being more proactive in serving customers

In recent years, utilities companies have put a larger emphasis on customer care, and in an increasing number of cases, proactively providing information even before the customer requests it. Examples include outbound dialing applications in which consumers are informed of downed power lines in their area, or notice of power interruptions due to non-payment. In many cases, the tone and tenor of the voice on the other end of the line is key driver of the customer experience.

Utilities are striving to serve a broader set of consumers and other stakeholders

Many of our utility customers have made a concerted effort to better serve consumer segments with special challenges, including the elderly and the disabled. In addition, many utilities serve geographies with a high percentage of non-English speaking customers. The most frequently employed languages have traditionally been Spanish and French, though the use of Asian-language prompts, such as Mandarin, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese has been growing significantly in recent years.

Utilities are deploying more technology in the management and protection of key infrastructure

On the operational side, utilities are leveraging technology to manage a wide array of physical assets - from transmission and distribution to the point of usage. They are looking for operating efficiencies for scheduling both preventative maintenance and repair of transmission lines and other distribution assets. They are also closely monitoring activities in and around power substations to ensure safety and compliance, and real-time technology is increasingly a part of the equation.

Special energy programs are proliferating, requiring more consumer education

The energy industry has largely taken to using professional voice recordings to help educate the public on their energy consumption, and how to use their energy more effectively and efficiently. As the general consumer base becomes more interested in sustainability and the environmental effects of their energy consumption, many energy companies have deployed automated voice systems, such as automated attendants and on hold messaging technology, to educate customers on energy conservation tips, energy saving equipment, and utility-sponsored energy-efficiency and rebate programs. Professional voice recording services are often employed for this application to ensure the information is clear, easily accessible, and delivered in polished, professional manner.



Did you know?

Google accounts for roughly 0.013% of the world's energy use. It uses enough energy to continuously power 200,000 homes.

According to Google, the energy it takes to conduct 100 searches on its site is equivalent to a 60-watt light bulb burning for 28 minutes. Google uses about 0.0003 kWh of energy to answer the average search query, which translates into about 0.2 g of carbon dioxide released.

Source: Albanesi, Chloe. "How Much Electricity Does Google Consume Each Year?" PC Mag. September 8, 2011. Accessed: February 8, 2012.

Best In-Class Voice Applications

Power Outage and Restoration Information

When disaster strikes and the power goes out, many individuals are affected. From a customer service standpoint, it can be difficult to handle high call volumes, especially when those calls are directly pertaining to an outage that is already in the process of being dealt with.

Many of our utility customers employ an IVR system that give consumers who call in during a power outage updated information as the problem is being dealt with. This system notifies customers of outages, enable customers to report outage and power status information, and provide access regarding the progress the utility is making towards restoring power. This gives customer service representatives the capacity to deal with more complex issues, as they no longer have to answer power outage and restoration questions for a high volume of callers.

For this type of application, professional voice talents are trained to employ the style, tone, and cadence appropriate to the situation; conveying an impression that can be reassuring and credibility-building during a stressful outage period. Some utilities play back the customer's specific address during the call flow, which powerfully conveys a sense that the utility is providing personalized service. A professional voice talent is adept at enunciating hard-to-pronounce addresses, and tends to sound more authentic than computer-generated, text-to-speech technology. In addition, utilities are

increasingly using outbound or proactive dialing systems to notify specific customers when power has been restored. Customers generally do not like to be "called by a computer", so it's particularly important in outbound applications that the recorded voice sound professional, friendly, and reassuring.

It is also key to cover as many stakeholders as possible. As a result, a number of our utility customers provide Latin American Spanish, Canadian French, and other language prompts to cover the broadest number of customers.

Account and Billing Information

One common use of professional voice prompts among our utility customers is in the area of account information and billing applications. Functions supported here include:

- Charges for initial account set-up
- Account number lookup and validation
- Price plan changes and effective dates
- Payment due date notification
- Payment not received messages
- Service expiration





Service Scheduling

In addition to providing information to customers, automated phone applications often support internal, as well as customer-facing, operational processes. Our most progressive natural gas utilities employ voice-enabled systems to schedule and manage services for gas leaks, equipment preventative maintenance and repair, service start and stops, parts replacement, and various sales and installation processes.

It is here where employing a professional voice services firm becomes critical. These kind of IVR applications tend to be subject to change over time, as processes are revised periodically. A professional voice firm archives and manages scripts over time, relieving this burden for the utility. This enables fast turnaround without distracting internal resources from their core responsibilities. Furthermore, professional voice talents are trained to maintain consistency in style, cadence, volume, and pronunciation. So when a recording conducted today is produced to modify and add prompts to a system initially implemented five years prior, the ensuing call flow projects as seamless and consistent to the caller.

Customer inquiries related to this information needs to be handled around the clock, but having an operator on hand at all times is simply not cost effective. Yet, it is still important that the voices on the other end of the line created a practical and emotional connection with the caller. Many of our utilities companies have worked with our voice talents to ensure their billing systems are not only efficient, but relatable. One particularly electric utility company pays special attention to the elderly and the disabled. Relative to the general population, these customers are highly likely to use phone services to pay their bills. One natural gas utility specifically chose both English and Spanish voice talents with these customers segments in mind – with the goal of creating comfort and familiarity through their respective vocal styles. A post-implementation survey indicated positive customer feedback, and the use of professional voice talents was determined to be a significant contributing factor in the increased level of the system's uptake rate.

One of our large natural gas utility customers recently moved from a touchtone system to a speech recognition platform with over 1,000 prompts for their billing and service scheduling application. The unique dynamics of speech recognition create a challenge for keeping the caller engaged. The project manager made the following observation:

“Our professionally recorded prompts come across as truly apologetic and sincere when the customer selects an invalid options or the speech engine does not properly interpret the customer utterance. Internal voice prompts tend to sound somewhat robotic; and nothing seems up a customer more than when a computer or robot voice tells them that we don't understand what we want! The last thing we want is a customer yelling “operator, operator, OPERATOR!!!” multiple times.

This application calls for short prompts and sub-prompts; such as numbers, dates, and short phrases, that need to be concatenated together. This requires the ability to sound out words and phrases with subtleties in inflection and tone that would be difficult for an untrained voice to consistently produce, resulting in a natural, conversational call flow. When attempted by untrained voices, the result can sound disjointed and “robotic”, which runs the risk of alienating callers. A professional voice talent can not only handle these nuances, she or he can replicate them consistently over time, ensuring a smooth customer calling experience.

Infrastructure Protection and Field Operations

Other voice-enabled applications are focused on internal employees and contractors rather than end consumers, and are aimed at reducing operating costs and ensuring safety and compliance. Here are two examples of best-in-class applications in this area:

Substation Authentication. One of our electrical utilities uses a voice-based system to monitor and report activities associated with entry of personnel into utility substations. These visits present a security risk and need to be tracked for safety and compliance purposes. Activities performed at the substation could include:

- Meetings
- Safety audit
- Training
- Fence repair
- New construction
- Painting of equipment
- Escorts and tours

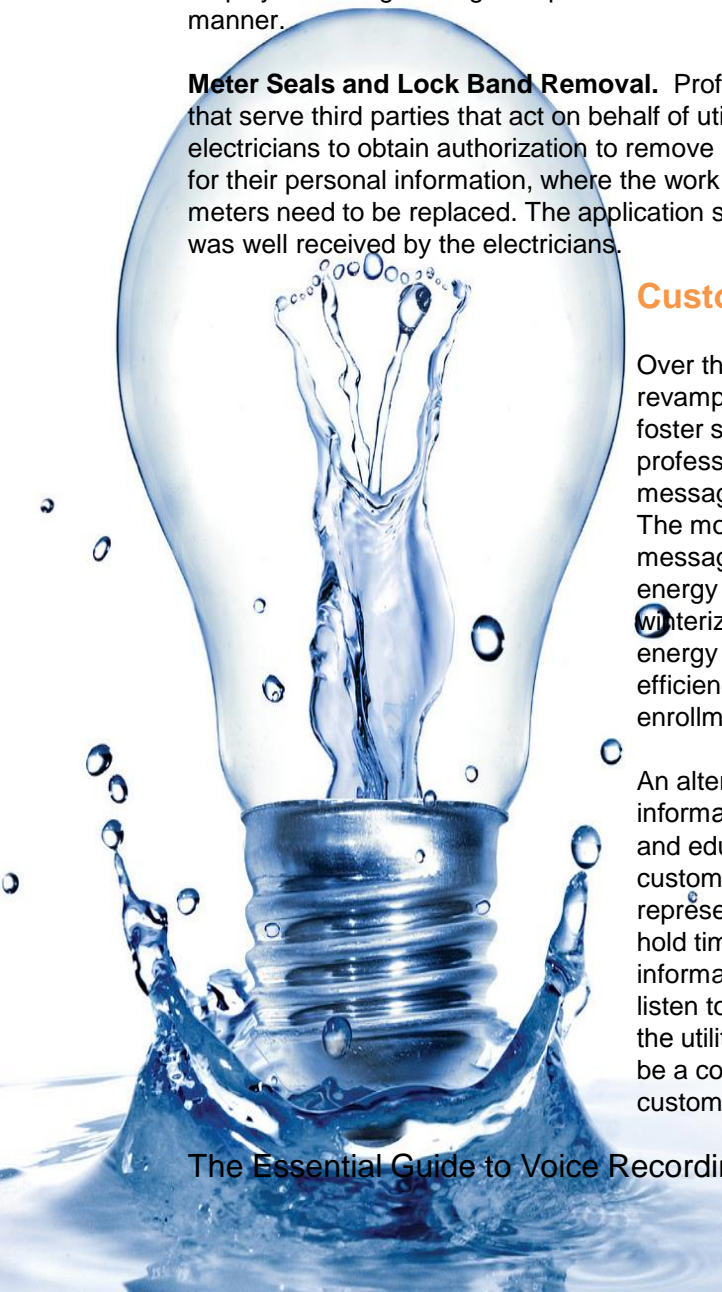
This application also calls for very short prompts that are strung together into phrases, which again, requires subtleties in inflection that are very hard for untrained voices to replicate consistently. The nature of the prompts also requires an engaging voice, as many of the substation entrants are first-time visitors who the utilities want to make feel at home. Internal voices often come off as “monotone” for applications in which the call flow is characterized by quick back-and-forth of short phrases between caller and system. In addition, this utility, which is located in the Southern U.S., employed a bilingual English/Spanish voice talent, who speaks both languages in an unaccented manner.

Meter Seals and Lock Band Removal. Professional voice prompts can be used in applications that serve third parties that act on behalf of utilities. For example, one electrical utility enables electricians to obtain authorization to remove meter seals or lock bands – prompting the electrician for their personal information, where the work is to be performed, what access is required, and what meters need to be replaced. The application streamlined this process, reduced operating costs, and was well received by the electricians.

Customer Education

Over the past few years, many of our utility customers are revamping their messaging to promote energy efficiency and foster social transparency with its consumers. Having a professional voice talent impart this information infuses this message with confidence, credibility, and professionalism. The more forward looking utilities employ voice prompts and messages to educate customers on how to manage their energy usage. One utility provides customers information on winterization instructions for their homes. Another provides energy saving tips and details on utility-sponsored energy efficiency programs – including rebate information and enrollment eligibility.

An alternative voice vehicle for communicating this information is “Messages-on-Hold”, in which promotional and educational messages are played over music while the customer is on hold waiting for a customer service representative or agent. While most utilities strive to reduce hold times in general, providing valuable and credible information is more helpful to customers than having them listen to silence or outdated hold music, and it also furthers the utility’s goals. Also, Messages-On-Hold has proven to be a cost-efficient way of promoting energy services that customer may not otherwise hear about.



Voice Marketing for the Energy Industry

Marketing Messages employs a services framework called Voice Marketing, which is a branding strategy that aligns all of an organization's professionally recorded messages and the unique attributes of a given voice with their value proposition. This alignment is achieved by employing a single voice or set of voices across a broad range of customer "voice touch points" - including phone, web, and other communication vehicles. Examples include when a caller is:

- Navigating through phone menus
- Conducting a phone transaction
- Waiting on hold
- Viewing a video on a website
- Being educated about a product or service



This approach yields the following benefits across all applications:

More consistent, professional caller experience - A trained voice talent sounds more professional and is adept at maintaining a consistent style, tone, and volume when recordings are updated. They also sound reassuring and calming during stressful periods such as outage periods.

Enhance brand image - More and more, utility companies are looking to build familiarity with their brand among ratepayers. Using the same professional voice across all voice-enabled systems reinforces the brand and builds familiarity with customers.

Connect Emotionally With Customers – Voice talents deliver recordings in a way that is emotionally compelling and consistently builds customer familiarity over time via continual reinforcement– whether the customer is calling to report a downed power wire, viewing a web video on how to winterize a residential or commercial building, or listening to details about a new energy services offering while on hold waiting for a call center again.

In addition to customer benefits, there are significant operational benefits that accrue to the energy utility itself:

Better use of resources – IVR systems in the energy industry, particularly billing and service scheduling systems, tend to have long systems lifecycles – requiring the use of voice talents over multi-year engagements. During the life of these system, internal employees who are often used for prompt recordings get promoted, transferred, or terminated. Adding a replacement voice to an existing system results in an inconsistent voice interface – so best to have a voice professional who has committed to voice recording as a career be retained as the long term voice of a customer-facing system.

Reduce administrative hassle - Employing a professional voice services firm eases the administrative burdens of coordinating recording schedules/deadlines for large energy utility companies with multiple systems, locations and languages.

Turnaround time – Often times, weather-related utility service events are specific to a particular weather emergency, and require specific messages to be generated with fast turnaround. Professional voice services firms are better equipped than internal resources, or independent voice contractors, to review scripts, arrange for recording, and provide audio file editing on an emergency basis.

Languages – Since utilities companies generally serve all demographic profiles within a given geography, it is beneficial to contract with a professional voice services firm that offers multiple options for languages outside of English, particularly Latin American, Canadian French, and Asian languages.

| Conclusion

The energy industry is changing at an exponential rate, and the type of services that consumers desire and expect is also growing at breakneck speeds. Because of the new technologies that customers are now using on a day-to-day basis, the need and desire for up-to-date, accurate and easily accessible information has grown. Employing professional voice prompts within a utility's IVR systems can help make a strong connection with customers while providing this information, at the same time helping to enhance the organization's image and credibility. The benefits of this approach extend to the operational side of energy transmission and distribution, in the form of process speed and efficiency.

If you'd like to learn more about how Marketing Messages' professional voice services offerings can help your organization, please contact us by [clicking here](#), or click the button below to request a one-on-one assessment of your voice strategy.