

Subscriber, serve thyself

When Canada's national newspaper replaced an existing IVR system with **ComputerTalk's ice[®] speech IVR** product, the customer contact center caught a break

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Peter Van Leeuwen, Manager of Customer Care, The Globe & Mail

The Challenge

- Reduce contact center call volumes through customer self-service
- Improve customer service and satisfaction
- Reduce agent occupancy

The Solution

- **ComputerTalk's ice[®] speech IVR** product

The Result

- A 67% reduction in call transfers from IVR to contact center
- Four fewer contact center agents on duty
- A 5% reduction agent on-call time
- Loyal and growing customer base

When you're the most trusted newspaper in the nation, a revered public institution, readers feel a sense of ownership. This isn't just their morning read, it's an essential daily routine, a vital link to the wider world. They demand superb customer service.

Which is why when The Globe & Mail, Canada's largest circulation daily, went looking for a new speech-based interactive voice response system to front-end its customer care center, it chose ComputerTalk and its **ice[®] speech IVR** product.

The system, live since 2005, has been a hit with subscribers, and also helped relieve pressure on the company's hard-working customer service agents.

"We wanted the new system to provide the customer as much opportunity for self-service as possible," explains Peter Van Leeuwen, the Globe's manager of customer care at the time.

"The goal was service anywhere, anytime, anyhow. The ComputerTalk solution helped us get to that point, and a lot of customers are very pleased with it."

Subscribers use it to submit stop and restart dates for delivery of their paper when they vacation, to report a missing or late delivery, order new subscriptions, change billing or delivery address information and get instant updates on their account.

One key requirement of the new solution was voice recognition. The old system only used DTMF



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Case Study

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
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(Dual-tone multi-frequency – touch-tone) input, which limited the type and amount of information the system could request from callers. Subscribers couldn't enter their address, for example, only a postal code.

And some customers just wouldn't use touch-tone IVR. Sixty percent of callers, in fact, jumped out of the IVR system to queue for a live contact center agent.

Now callers can say the date they want the Globe to stop delivering their paper for vacation. The system reads it back to get confirmation and prompts for the restart date. It will even ask if they'd like to donate skipped papers to charity or have their account credited.

"It's like having a conversation with a live person," Van Leeuwen says.

Poorly designed IVR systems using inferior voice recognition technology can do more harm to customer relations than good. This wasn't the case with the Globe system – which is hardly surprising.

The system uses **ice® IVR**, the standards-based speech technology that ComputerTalk, a pioneer in the field, jointly developed with Nuance. The ComputerTalk implementation team also has unmatched skills and experience in designing and deploying IVR systems.

Van Leeuwen was particularly impressed with the way ice IVR can learn and adapt to different speakers. Scottish accents were a problem at first – and Canada has lots of Scots immigrants – but the system eventually learned to understand all but the thickest brogues. "That feature is amazing," he says.

Customers did have to adjust to the new system, of course. "There were some grumbles at first," Van Leeuwen admits. "But over time, people have become quite accustomed to it and now like it a lot."

So much so, in fact, that the Globe exceeded its initial target for reducing the percentage of calls transferred to the contact center ACD. It hoped for a 40% "lift," it achieved a 67% reduction. The reason: subscribers embraced the speech technology and more now use self-service for address changes and vacation stops.

The Globe as a result has permanently reduced by four the number of agents on duty, reassigning staff to other essential work. "It may not sound like that much," Van Leeuwen says of the head count reduction. "But when you consider the fully-loaded cost of top agents, it makes a significant difference."

Another key benefit: reduced "occupancy," the time in a shift agents actually spend with callers. Before the new system, Van Leeuwen worried his people

were approaching the point where, as he puts it, they "don't have a chance to draw breath." Now occupancy is down to a reasonable 85% – despite the reduced complement of agents.

ComputerTalk's crack implementation team worked with the Globe IT systems department under manager Penny Halley and Van Leeuwen's group to implement the new system.

It was by no means a trivial undertaking, not least because the newspaper was also on the point of switching from a legacy IBM mainframe to an ERP system from SAP. And as always, there were links with new and legacy back-end systems – circulation, master customer database, billing, etc. – to engineer.

"With any project of this magnitude, there are always going to be situations where things aren't working yet quite the way they should," Halley says. "In this one, we had something like 1,100 pages of workflow [in the IVR design] to go through quality assurance. Whatever came up, though, ComputerTalk was always very responsive."

The Globe was so impressed with the technology and service, in fact, that it selected **ComputerTalk's ice®** contact center solution to replace an aging Nortel Symposium ACD. That project is still in the product testing phase.

The paper is also moving ahead to take advantage of additional functionality in the ice IVR platform. Van Leeuwen wants to implement upsell features that will allow the IVR system to ask callers if they would like to subscribe to partner publications, the New York Times and Wall Street Journal.

The Globe and ComputerTalk are also now in the process of implementing some of ice IVR's advanced CTI (Computer Telephony Integration) features so that when callers do bounce from the IVR system to the contact center, their information will appear on the agent's screen, saving customers having to repeat it.

At a time when daily newspapers are under increasing economic pressure, the 163-year-old Globe remains vibrant. Customer churn is lower than industry norms and paid home delivery actually continues to grow.

The reasons? An excellent product, of course, plus daring, innovative use of information technology – the **ice® speech IVR** system is a great example – to help bring operating costs down while keeping quality and customer service high.



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