The Future of [Voice] Interactions
As a leader in voice interactions for 30 years, West is often asked, “Is interactive voice response (IVR) going away – or at least being minimized by other channels?” The short answer is “no,” but it is definitely evolving.

In order to recognize where voice is headed as a channel for customer engagement and support, one must take time to understand contemporary consumer behavior that spans multiple channels and devices over time. “Mobility” doesn't just describe mobile devices or applications anymore, so much as a shift in overall consumer behavior and yet another mode for voice (and chat, SMS/text, Web, etc.) interaction. Brands can no longer have complete control over the channels customers use, nor insist on sticking to one when interacting with them.

**Voice is part of a communication ecosystem that supports an entity’s overall customer experience.** We believe that brands that effectively connect interactions across the customer journey, predict behavior to improve delivery, and prescribe a perpetually better experience will be strategically positioned to evolve with consumers – promoting efficiency, heightening profitability, maximizing meaningful engagement and winning loyalty.

The “new voice channel” is one that is in sync with other channels and ever-improved by business analytics to meet the evolving needs of today’s educated, mobile and always-connected consumer.

**WHERE DOES IVR FIT?**

Voice and self-service innovation is not about new, shiny services that can be layered into automated technology. It’s not about voice biometrics, multi-modal product offerings or virtual agents. In fact, it’s not even really about “IVR” anymore…

Brands that strategically integrate traditional voice response systems with all other channels (mobile, contact center, online, in-store, etc.) and business analytics will be positioned to efficiently deliver the experience their customers demand.

**It’s no secret that traditional IVR has failed to keep pace with rising expectations.** For example, the Millennials and Centennials who make up nearly two-thirds of our population seamlessly cut across channels and devices to converse with brands. While this cohort is all for “self-service,” companies can’t afford to view their calls in isolation; voice response systems must be a part of fostering trust, transparency, predictability, mobility and personalization.
According to Gartner, “acting as one organization to ensure multi-channel consistency” was executives’ top priority in 2015.¹ And brands that are championing this omni-channel strategy understand that yesterday’s approach to IVR is no longer hitting the mark.

The traditional definition of IVR, including simply inbound voice, call supervision and call routing, has grown stale because end-users don’t distinguish between channels or organizational silos. They do not go to the marketing function in response to an ad, nor directly to the sales group to help them complete an online purchase. They don’t understand why they have to explain why they’re calling after getting an SMS notification to contact you about their order. They get frustrated when they have to relay the same information to an agent that they just entered into their keypad.

Virtual, live and automated support is one in the same to the consumer. Yet, according to Gartner, only 18 percent of companies surveyed have a single, holistic view of their customers’ experience across all channels, and only 20 percent consider their channels “deeply integrated.”² What’s more, that connectivity seems to be based on self-analysis, with little regard for end-users’ agreement – much less, input.

As channels blend and blur into each other, so too must our functions, such as sales, marketing, customer care and IT operations – all keeping the end-user’s experience in mind.

Companies that fail to address voice as one element of multi-channel connectivity will have a distinct disadvantage in terms of market differentiation, operational efficiency, overall customer experience and, almost surely, profitability.

**ENHANCING SELF-SERVICE WITH VISUALS**

While voice is one important channel for reaching customers, it’s still just that: one channel. Humans have five senses to take in information, and traditional IVR relies on only one to get information across.
But as consumer demand for more interactive self-service increases, technology is following suit with options that engage multiple senses through audio and visual integration. By sending links to callers’ mobile phones via SMS while connected to an IVR, this type of service lets callers interact with visuals online and improves both efficiency and the customers’ ability to self-serve.

Research shows humans process visual data better than any other form of information. In fact, 90 percent of information transmitted to the brain is visual, and visual aids can increase comprehension by up to 400 percent.\(^3\)

When visuals are integrated into the traditional IVR experience, a caller can see a visible calendar before scheduling an appointment, fine-tune communication preferences to get the most appropriate messaging or complete a mobile web form while receiving clear instructions from the IVR. Adding visuals to voice triggers the two senses people most rely on to communicate and delivers a high-touch, transparent and enjoyable customer experience.

Organizations that look to a dual audio and visual experience are primed to surprise and delight consumers. This type of technology not only serves customers across channels, it integrates the channels into a single experience, with the primary being voice.

By being more interactive and intuitive, audio-visual integration bridges the gap between the simplicity of IVR self-service and the sophistication of an agent. It answers customers’ questions while embracing mobility to create a truly personalized and differentiated experience customers remember.

**IMPROVING PERFORMANCE WITH DATA**

Evolution in brands’ multi-channel mindset will have implications not only on our operational processes and organizational functions, but also our proprietary, user-preference and third-party data sources. As we build comprehensive communication ecosystems, centered around a consolidated user-interface, business rules and databases, companies will be able to do more with a single source of truth about consumers.

The questions of tomorrow will be focused on how we can leverage data and advanced analytics in our engagement strategies to predict customer behavior and improve voice channel performance. Furthermore, how can we incorporate business intelligence at critical points to prescribe a different experience?
Data will soon go far beyond reporting, passive mining and rearview analysis. Though executives surveyed by Gartner deemed “collection and analysis of customer feedback” their top priority in 2014, most now recognize that historic trends are not always the best predictor of customer behavior. Less than two years later, 54 percent of respondents to a recent survey stated that the greatest value and insight will come from proactive experimentation informed by data.

According to Gartner, by 2018 nearly 50 percent of all customer service interactions will be influenced by data and analytics – not to mention other stages of the customer experience continuum, such as attraction, acquisition and purchase.

*We are just now beginning to learn what we can do to drive customer experience lifecycle management maturity by optimizing communication solutions’ performance using advanced analytics.*

That’s the future of voice; that’s where IVR is headed; and that’s how West is guiding clients to create connected customer experiences.

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**ABOUT WEST**

West delivers communication solutions that help brands create connected customer experiences. We have 30 years of experience strategically improving customer interaction, enhancing productivity and increasing profitability, with clients in healthcare, education, utilities and diverse commercial industries. West Interactive Services solutions include IVR & Self-Service, Proactive Notifications & Mobility, Cloud Contact Center and Professional Services. Experience Connected at west.com/interactive

West was recognized for a Leading IVR by CRM Magazine and Innovative Proactive Notifications Suite by Frost & Sullivan.

**REFERENCES**