



Interactive Voice Response – IVR

Councils are under increasing pressure to offer an enhanced end-to-end service to citizens while operating within strict budgetary constraints. Clearly, achieving both objectives is difficult. Armed with the latest automated technology solutions, however, the task of improving quality while cutting costs is far from impossible.

Using IVR to improve service delivery

It's the \$64,000 question. How do Councils meet growing customer expectations without increasing costs? Technology provides many answers. CRM technology, for example, can assist by equipping Agents to resolve more queries at first point of contact. Workforce Management (WFM) and Management Information Statistics (MIS) software can help too, by ensuring that the right number of Agents - with the right skills - are available at the right time, to answer incoming contacts. However such technology is not a panacea. There will always be times – such as when unexpected or seasonal events occur – when additional Agents are required to meet citizen expectations, and this in itself can create more problems.

Where can it be used?

With the Gershon and Varney reports putting pressure on UK Councils to reduce costs and increase efficiency, well-designed IVR services can form a critical part of modern contact centre operations.

Let's firstly consider unexpected events. This can be anything from freak weather; benefits cheque being posted late, to an incorrect mail out. As a result, citizens will call in for assistance, or to inform the Council of events (often not knowing that other people are phoning in to report the same). If a caller is waiting twenty minutes to be answered, they will be understandably upset and are likely to complain to Agents, Team Leader and/or Managers. Such complaints will have a further

detrimental affect on response times and will inevitably lead to a lowering of courtesy levels, regardless of how well Agents are trained, and however conscientious they are. These factors will lead in turn to further complaints, and a further lowering of service levels.

Known events – such as a local festival or major roadworks – can cause even more disruption than unexpected or anomalous events as callers (and sometimes the press!) know they are about to occur and often ask why service around them cannot be handled better!

The IVR option

During busy and tricky periods such as these, many Councils are now turning to Interactive Voice Response (IVR) services. Using IVR not only means customers don't have to wait in queues to hear simple pieces of information but also that Councils are better able to handle busy periods without increasing staffing levels.

A knock-on effect is that callers who urgently need to speak to Agents can get through quicker, and have a better chance of reaching people with the soft skills training required to deal with caller stress and diffuse issues before they develop into complaint calls.

This can result in call durations falling, caller satisfaction levels rising, and more consistent service delivery during busy periods.

Councils that are promoting a single customer service phone number, but running multiple services behind that number, are also increasingly turning to IVR services.

A good example of this is Council Tax. By providing an IVR menu, Councils are enabling callers to choose the particular service they require and be routed to an appropriate Agent. This is especially useful during peak call volume periods, such as the busy main billing period, and means Councils no longer need to draft in back office staff.

In one example, Stratford-upon-Avon District Council, successfully used IVR to reduce staffing during their main billing period from forty to six personnel, using an IVR with five menu choices for council tax, NNDR etc.

IVR in Environmental Services

IVR has also proven extremely useful in the Environmental Services area, where queries can typically either take a very short or a very long time to handle. Under these circumstances, IVR can efficiently route callers to the optimum Agent group, provide a higher level of service to callers and more flexibility to the Council.

The use of IVR within Environmental Services can also be very useful at Christmas and Easter when people call to find out when waste collections will be made. This can significantly reduce call volume spikes that occur on the first working day after the New Year.

IVR in Automated Payments

A growing number of Councils are using IVR to provide facilities for citizens to make automated payments for council tax, parking fines etc. without having to speak directly to a person. Payments can be made easily and rapidly, 24 hours a day.

Local Government Customer Survey

IVR can also be used to gather information. Councils can use the Macfarlane CallPlus Customer Survey software to ask callers whether they are happy to take part in a survey – and then collect their answers. The Customer Survey system will pose a series of questions, configured by the council and then ask callers to respond by either pressing buttons on their phones (touch tone response) or by speaking their choices (speech recognition). Used within an IVR service, speech recognition technology is particularly effective when used to cut down the number of menu options offered to callers – improving the customer experience and cutting transaction times dramatically.

Experts in IVR

When installations are planned carefully and tested effectively, IVR can deliver massive benefits in terms of reduced call handling costs, improved speed of service, convenience and improved customer experience.

Successful implementations of IVR typically keep menu choices to a minimum and provide callers with real value and satisfaction. With over 80 councils now using CallPlus, Macfarlane has the expertise to assist organisations in creating effective IVR services with excellent caller interfaces.

Speech Recognition Technology

The benefits of speech recognition are many, but in the IVR context, this technology can be used to both avoid multiple choice push button menu options which frustrate callers and will cut transaction times dramatically

If you would like to know more about how we can help increase productivity, reduce costs and help you comply with the government's performance indicators, then contact us on 020 7314 1314.



Macfarlane Telesystems Limited,
22-26 Albert Embankment,
London SE1 7TJ

Tel: 020 7314 1314
Fax: 020 7314 1315
Email: info@macfar.co.uk

www.macfar.co.uk

Reference 12/2007