



Building a Better (Voice) Brand:

Covering the Bases to Provide a World-Class Caller Experience

- Matt Strach, Brand Manager, GM Voices



Consumers interface with a brand (and form their perceptions of it) at many different touch points: the Web, an in-store experience, face to face with a representative, advertising across all media, public relations (directly or through an influencer), and, of course, the telephone and other automated voice applications.

Unfortunately for us at GM Voices, only the voice channel seems to be so undervalued and misinterpreted by C-level executives and brand marketing teams. Why is it that this (often times) point of first contact is the sole domain of telephony and IT departments that aren't as fundamentally keyed into corporate branding? If GM Voices works with a company through a branding or marketing contact, our batting average is just about perfect for a Voice Branding initiative—improving the automated customer experience with a brand-appropriate voice to best connect with a calling audience.

But perhaps I'm preaching to the choir. If you're reading this white paper, it means you're hip—or at least receptive—to improving your customer contacts through voice automation like IVR, automated attendant and call routing. Whether the marketing team at Fortune 500 'Company A' knows it or not, automation plays a huge part in how customers interact with a brand. Just think about the cable and Internet service providers that have been savaged in years past for providing a poor customer experience over the phone. Aside from oil spills and food poisoning, has there been worse PR in recent history? These issues go far beyond the prerecorded voices that greet and guide callers, true, as do the recommendations in this essay. Don't get discouraged: We all know that angry customers are much more likely to share their (negative) experiences with friends and the impressionable online masses. But what then is the reward for companies that do automation right, the companies that align the voice channel with their other branding touch points? Well, their customers keep calling, they keep buying, and they stay contained within the automated system, saving the company money, both from live agent assistance and bad PR damage control.

To summarize: It is worth your time to evaluate the way your business interacts with customers on the phone. As you begin your research—calling into your own automation, your competitors' automation, talking to your telephony manager to gauge feedback, gathering data, etc.—be sure to reference the below points to assess how your caller experience, and by extension, brand, stands in the marketplace. Or better yet, contact GM Voices; we've made this process easy for customers for over 25 years with our renowned Voice Brand Audits.

Fundamental Tenets of a World-Class Voice Brand

1. A brand-consistent voice:

What are the hallmarks of your brand? Who is a typical customer? What lifestyle do they lead, and why have they chosen to call you or do business with you? The voice that speaks as a virtual representative for your company should personify your current branding, sales objectives and customer psychographics. Callers know when a hip technology company makes the effort to communicate with them on their level, or when the luxury retailer has a voice that makes them go, "Huh? This doesn't make me feel like a jetsetter."

GM Voices records with trained, professional voice actors who can adjust their vocal performance to meet the requirements of your brand. With a simplified approach to persona development, we do the legwork and provide the reference materials needed to help our voices capture a brand image that will resonate with your unique customer base.

There are many options (good and bad) when choosing a voice. For a more detailed look, see Marcus Graham's Speech Recognition, the Brand and the Voice: How to Choose a Voice for Your Application in the white paper index of our Web site.

2. A one-voice caller experience:

Nothing says 'brand discontinuity' or 'mixed-up marketing' like an IVR application featuring multiple, inconsistent prerecorded voices. It's more common than you think, and the risk increases as the scope of the automation grows. There are many reasons why this is so prominent: budgetary constraints (if using a professional voice talent), unavailability for updates (for a departed employee 'internal' voice, for example), a mix of technologies and/or botched hand-offs between applications.

However, none of these reasons are valid enough to sabotage a customer contact. GM Voices' value proposition addresses each of these concerns. Through our weekly session recording schedule, our preferred voice actors record on the same day each week. By bundling orders, we're able to offer the most reasonable prices, making voice continuity possible during distressed economic times. This schedule also ensures an easy-to-plan production cycle; with your voice talent available for ongoing updates, no longer are you reliant on an internal voice who may leave the company. GM Voices can also provide ready-to-load voice files for any mix of technology for any platform or provider. Your technical requirements shouldn't hinder the quality of a customer interaction. With GM Voices as your voice supplier, they won't.

At other customer touch points, the brand is expected to conform to a unified vision—a consistency of style, tone and message. The prerecorded voice on your automation, the audio personification of your brand, should be treated no differently; crisp, clear, brand consistent.

3. Language localization—Spanish callers and beyond:

So maybe your English-language Voice Brand is perfect. You're not off the hook yet. Are your Spanish-speaking customers getting the same service? Does your company offer international service or operate overseas call centers? The language may be different, but the revenue is the same. For most U.S.-based companies with larger automated call applications, Spanish is pretty much a necessity. A little stat to chew on: The U.S. Spanish-language market will triple over the next 40 years. Accordingly, its spending influence is skyrocketing. For years, GM Voices has helped Fortune 1000 companies deploy brand-consistent Spanish voice recordings with outstanding results.

Similar to what we've seen over centuries of U.S. English-language assimilation, Spanish is becoming more standardized in this country. To this end, GM Voices recommends what's called neutral Spanish, an increasingly-demanded domestic standard that connects with Spanish-language callers of any disparate country of origin: Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Americas and even Continental Europe. Think of neutral Spanish as the equivalent of the unaccented "Midwestern American" style that is favored on newscasts, commercial voice overs and, yes, automated telephony. Through weekly sessions, GM Voices offers many female and male neutral Spanish voice actors.

For Spanish and any other international language, a skilled translator and localization expert is required to make the voice prompts work for that calling audience. If it doesn't sound authentic, the application fails; the Voice Brand won't be credible to customers. Naturally, any international language project with GM Voices is localized to ensure international market acceptance.

Currently, GM Voices offers over 100 languages and dialects—voices that span six continents from Afrikaans to Zulu.

4. High-quality production across all voice prompts, all applications:

Why is it that some voice prompts (often in the same system) sound crystal clear while others sound like they were recorded on your grandma's old Dictaphone? Some recordings pierce your eardrums; others are practically inaudible. When you're managing the voice production process internally, a piecemeal and bizarre customer experience is sure to follow. Are the words 'piecemeal' and 'bizarre' brand descriptors at your other touch points? Didn't think so.

More goes into recording, editing and managing voice prompts than you'd like to think about. And because it's not your core competency, you shouldn't have to think about it. Just know that uniform, high-quality production starts with a clearly-defined process (aforementioned).

GM Voices references previous voice prompt orders to make sure that the voice performance, volume levels and technical considerations are seamless for ongoing updates. Maintaining a consistent 'read style' allows companies to plug in new voice files with recordings that may have been deployed a decade ago.

State-of-the-art recording gear captures crystalline playback, and any vocal imperfections (pops, clicks, breaths) are eliminated so callers hear the prompts clearly.

Finally, voice prompts require thorough organization—naming structure, directories and subdirectories, and file formats. Keeping things orderly makes implementation much easier. Naturally, GM Voices can deliver ready-to-load files in any file format for any mix of technology with your preferred organizational/naming convention.

5. Scripting for success:

In the most simplified sense, what is the objective of an IVR application? It's to help callers handle business as quickly, conveniently and cheaply as possible; to automate routine customer requests, and route and segment calls efficiently. While you strive for these goals, you reinforce the brand image as consistently and tastefully as you are able. The only way you accomplish any of this is through an effective script and voice user interface (VUI) design. Was your call flow crafted by an expert? A good way to find out is to ask your telephony manager what percentage of inbound callers are 'zeroing out' to speak to a live agent. Dial into the application as if you were an actual customer. Is it respectful of your limited time? Is there a logical flow? Does it quickly identify your hypothetical reason for calling? Break out a stopwatch and time the exchange. Another sobering stat for the Voice Brand challenged: A contained call costs about seven cents, a call handled by a live agent costs upwards of \$7.50.

GM Voices offers VUI consulting services for any budget for any depth of automation. Whether you need a quick fix to an auto attendant or in-depth, reconstructive surgery for a complex healthcare application, we can help you script your automation for success.

With these tips in mind, you're ready to look into the mirror (and listen in on the receiver) to find out how your Voice Brand stacks up. The good news: It's never too late to make an improvement. The better news: *GM Voices is here to help.*