

IT ZONE

By Alexander J. Hanna

Do you really need to press 0 for the Operator?

"Welcome to Company X, for customer service press 1, for accounts press 2, for the company directory press #, or press 0 for the operator." How many times have you contacted a business by telephone only to be greeted with such a recorded message? Don't answer that. These types of systems are known as Automated Attendants (AA) and allow callers to be automatically transferred to a person's extension without the intervention of a receptionist. AA is one component of Voice Processing Technology that allows the processing of calls in one fashion or the other. Voice Processing Technology can include voice mail and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) solutions. I have a love-hate affair with these systems. As a matter of fact, my first job after college was working for a firm in the US that specialized in Voice Processing technology.

While Voice Processing technology varies greatly, this article will focus on Automated Attendants (AA). Upfront, a poorly implemented AA system will defeat its intended purpose to automatically assist callers to connect to their desired call destination within a business. While I will not pick on any individual company, on a daily basis, callers are extremely frustrated when they contact certain businesses which have implemented AA systems. Some of the reasons for their dissatisfaction include:

- Not hearing the option they want on the menu.
- After selecting a menu option, they end up waiting for an extended amount of time for someone to provide assistance.
- After selecting a menu option, they are transferred to a voice mail box to leave a message.
- No option is available to contact the operator

It is evident that businesses are implementing AA systems without proper consultation hoping that it would enhance their business. AA systems should not be implemented in this manner. Businesses should first determine the problems to be resolved and the objectives of the system to maximize their AA system usage. Therefore, I advise you to get a consultant.

Traffic Study

I strongly recommend that businesses seriously consider a traffic study on their incoming calls with reference to an AA system. The Bahamas Telecommunications Company (BTC) has the ability to perform this study and I have used their services several times in the past. A traffic study is extremely important because it shows at a minimum the number of incoming calls into your business which can be reviewed and compared again after implementing your AA system. For example, if your traffic study reveals that you average 1,000 calls per day (based on the eight hour work day – 125 calls per hour/2 calls per minute) with only one operator, depending on the type of business, you might consider adding an additional operator or implementing an AA system. The number one reason for implementing an AA system is to quickly assist in automatically answering and processing calls. Therefore, without a traffic study, how can you measure the effectiveness of your AA system? However, with a study, you now know that your business receives 1,000 calls per day and you are now on your way to measuring the effectiveness of your AA system.

For businesses that already have an operational AA system, I recommend that you have a traffic study done to better evaluate your AA system. Depending on your system, it might/should have the ability to provide a traffic study. This will be the case if the AA system is implemented in such a way that all incoming calls pass through it. Therefore, the AA will show how many calls came into the business; how many were handled by the operator; how many were transferred to John Doe? etc.

Menu Options

Providing user-friendly menu options in an AA system is always a challenge. Most often businesses have too many menu options for the public to choose from. Again, this is a bad idea; menu options should be limited to a reasonable number. The reason why I have not stated a definite number is because it is not only the number of menu options but also the length of time it takes for the recorded voice to relay the menu options to the caller that decides the user friendliness of an AA system. Both these aspects together determine the characteristics of a reasonable menu. The bottom line is that you have to script your menu options, listen to them and adjust them accordingly.

AA systems also consist of sub-menus which are menus that you hear after you would have selected another menu option. For example, a menu might say "Press 3 for sales" and after you select 3, you are then greeted with another set of menu options. This other set of menu options is a sub-menu. We all have encountered sub-menus at certain business establishments and they seem to go on forever. However, the worst part is that once you finally hear and select your menu option, one of four things will happen:

- 1) You are transferred to a voice mail requesting that you leave a message and that someone will eventually return your call. You hardly ever know who you are leaving the message for, only that you are leaving it. So if no one calls you back, how do you identify the individual for whom you left the message?
- 2) The phone rings without anyone answering it. Therefore, you have to hang up and repeat the whole process all over again. Talk about blood presser rising!
- 3) Someone finally answers the phone and you congratulate yourself, "Yes! Finally a live person!" only to find out that this person cannot assist you. Then the person tells you to hold on while they transfer you to someone who can assist you. Well you know what happens now. You are transferred back into the menu system to do it all over again.
- 4) You are placed in a Call Waiting Queue (CWQ). I can write several articles on the subject of CWQ. However, though CWQs are necessary, they must be implemented properly. Yes, **"it always comes down to implementation"**. Depending on the business type, you can never have enough persons in place to handle all incoming calls. However, implementing a CWQ can assist you in managing calls and enhancing callers' experience. At a minimum, your CWQ should announce to the caller the number of persons in the queue and the estimated amount of time before their call can possibly be answered.

Now I am sure some of you reading this are convinced that more than four things that I outlined can happen. Trust me, I agree but I want to highlight the main obstacles for users.



An extremely important aspect of the four points mentioned above (especially for Call Waiting Queues) is that once the call is answered, the person answering the call should be qualified to assist the caller. Nothing offends callers more than waiting for a long period just to be answered by someone who has no clue how to assist them. They might as well not answer the phone.

Remember, the number one object of an AA system is to assist and direct callers to their desired party as quickly as possible. If they are bogged down trying to figure out the menu, then you have defeated the purpose of your AA system.

AA in Government

There have been some talks about AA systems being used in government offices. In most cases, based on the current AA configurations, I agree that they are not as beneficial as they could be to the public. However, it does not mean that they are not needed. AA systems are needed in government and in most businesses today. However, as mentioned, **it always comes down to implementation.**

In conclusion, you can implement AA systems in your business depending on the number of incoming calls on a daily basis. However, please get in touch with professional consultants to help you maximize the benefits of your AA system.

Judging from prevalent AA systems, I humbly suggest that most of them require reevaluation to ensure that they benefit business and provide real assistance to the public. In addition, organizations should not make the mistake of implementing an AA system and immediately forgetting about it. If a business is serious about enhancing their callers' experience, then they should continuously reevaluate their AA system to ensure it is effective and user friendly. Until next time (UNT).

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