Making the Right Speech Technology Decision

Whether a company is replacing its aging touchtone IVR systems, updating first generation voice technology, or simply starting from scratch, there's never been a better time to take advantage of next-generation self-service speech applications. With giant leaps in innovation over the past several years, speech technology has overcome earlier handicaps to become the self-service solution of choice.

Help! My Business Users Want Speech

Key Technical Questions to Ask
Before You Buy Speech Self-Service

Today's speech solutions have progressed to highly sophisticated, conversational applications that deliver superior customer service and satisfaction. The high levels of service quality and cost-effectiveness compared to live agents has vaulted speech to a strategic position within the contact center.

While the contact center may initiate the search for a new speech solution, the burden of due diligence often falls to IT in the purchase decision. This buying guide is designed to help those tasked with evaluating speech solutions in understanding the critical functionality needed for enterprise-class, self-service speech applications. Regardless of where in the decision-making process a company may find itself, the checklists included here can lend structure and insight into the process.

The Top Four Criteria Every Company Should Evaluate

While the order of importance is certainly negotiable, the following four criteria should be mandatory when it comes to selecting a speech technology provider.

All speech solutions are not created equal and how thoroughly a provider can fulfill the requirements listed here can directly influence the efficacy and return on investment of the speech solution chosen.

The assumption is being made in this guide that the organization has already recognized the difficulty of developing a robust speech application in house. The expert resources, development time, and costs required to develop these applications from scratch— not to mention the effort and skill to maintain and tune the applications—make a strong argument for pursuing a vendor solution. Once the following requirements are also factored into the decision, the vast majority of companies will opt to purchase a vendor solution.

1. Fast Deployment and Ease of Integration

It may seem blasphemous to suggest, but the underlying foundation of a speech application can be more crucial to success than the range of capabilities it may provide. Why? Consider the impact on return on investment if it takes nine months, a year, or longer to implement a speech application due to complex or inflexible technology. Compare that to an equally sophisticated solution that takes as little as eight weeks to become operational—faster time-to-benefit, higher ROI.

Central to rapid deployment is the flexibility to integrate quickly and seamlessly with a company's current and future IT and telecom infrastructure. Speech solutions

can't operate effectively as islands—they must be able to interact with front-end systems, back office applications, and third-party data sources as needed. Likewise, they must be configured to support a company's security requirements—including relevant industry-specific mandates and regulations.

A Deployment and Integration Checklist:
- How long will it take for the speech application to be truly operational?
- Does the solution comply with your company's security requirements? Does the vendor store or persist sensitive customer data?
- What deployment options are available to help speed implementation?
- What data integration and transport capabilities does the vendor provide?
- What will it take for the solution to work seamlessly within your environment?
- How difficult will it be for your department to provide data access to the solution provider?

Voxify on Deployment and Integration
- » Standard 8-12 week implementation time
- » Comprehensive support for data security standards and regulations, including Payment Card Industry Data Security Standards (PCI DSS) and HIPAA
- » Voxify never stores or persists sensitive customer data
- » Flexibility of deployment with hosted, on premise, and hybrid models
- » Widest variety of data integration options, including Web services or other Internet protocols, Java-based APIs, mainframe, and more
- » Data transmission methods supported include VPN, MPLS, HTTPS
- » Integrates seamlessly with your environment including:
  - Popular business applications such as order management, inventory, and CRM
  - Existing telecom infrastructure (ACDs, switches, IVRs) from Avaya, Genesys, Nortel, Siemens, and others
  - Computer telephony integration (CTI)
  - Prebuilt integration to IT and third-party data sources such as TARGUSinfo,® Sabre® GDS, Open Skies by Navitaire

2. Manageability

The corollary to fast deployment is manageability. A speech application needs to be as dynamic as the business, changing as rapidly as market conditions, weather, customer preferences, and other events impacting your customer service change. That's why it is absolutely imperative to understand how rapidly and easily a vendor's speech solution can be modified.

Complex, custom applications are notorious for requiring expert programming resources to modify them—even for the simplest changes. Contacting the vendor to maintain the application can be an expensive proposition, not to mention the productivity loss during the process. Look for a vendor that enables your company to maintain the speech application yourself with easy-to-use and secure management tools. A contact center manager should be able to change routing of the call flow dynamically based on volume, peaks, available agents, customer behavior analysis and sales programs. Call flow, prompts, and even speech recognition parameters (such as grammars) should also be user-modifiable.

Maintaining the speech application also encompasses adjustments and performance tuning based on monitoring and analysis of the application. Such analyses often yield new business insights. For example, a company may assume that the majority of its callers have the order number required to look up their order status. In fact, by listening to a sampling of calls, the company discovers that most callers do not have their order numbers and are hanging up in frustration. Changing the prompt and call flow can easily rectify the situation. Companies should choose a vendor that enables applications to be monitored and tuned in real-time in order to maintain peak performance and ensure customer satisfaction.

A Manageability Checklist:
- How will the speech application be maintained once it is deployed? Must changes be outsourced to the provider?
- How long does it take and what does it cost to make changes?
- What tools, if any, does the vendor provide to help companies change the application and what types of changes are supported?

Voxify on Manageability
- » Complete user control enables contact center managers to change and maintain the application as necessary
- » Changes can be made quickly and easily by the user with no need to incur programming or consulting fees
- » Intuitive, Web-based consoles enable the user to change and test call flow, routing, menus, prompts, and more using a drag and drop interface
- » Console functionality is specific to each unique application
- » User-controlled testing within the production environment
- » Deployment capabilities including real time propagation, version control, and easy rollback
- » 24 x 7 managed service and support, including: Web-based reports and analysis, periodic performance tuning, and proactive monitoring

- Does the vendor offer management tools tailored to your specific application/call type?
- Can changes be tested and if something goes wrong rolled back to the previous version without vendor intervention?
- What level of support does the vendor provide? For instance, are monitoring, tuning, reporting, and analysis included?

3. Scalability

Balancing resources to handle spikes in call volume—be it predictable spikes around certain times of day or the unexpected—is a fact of daily life for all contact centers. Contact center managers are under pressure to ensure that resources are sufficient to handle the amount of incoming calls in a timely manner. When resources are scheduled incorrectly and incoming calls

are misrouted, wait times can skyrocket, sending customer satisfaction and revenue into a downward spiral.

While call volume in some companies may be more predictable than in others, companies should not underestimate the importance of ensuring that their speech solution has the ability to handle any call volume that may occur. Organizations must understand exactly how the speech application is designed and deployed to support growth in call volumes over time, in the short term, and specifically during drastic spikes in volume. One option is scalability on-demand, which lets an organization scale up or down as needs change without having to build out capacity to support volumes that may only occasionally occur. There may be other ways the vendor proposes to ensure scalability, but look carefully at the costs and risk your company may be asked to bear.

A Scalability Checklist:
- How does the vendor handle growth in call volumes?
- What deployment choices are available to reduce the cost of providing adequate capacity?
- How does the vendor handle call spikes?

Voxify on Scalability
- » Offers capacity on demand for scalability as volume increases
- » Hosted model and On Premise Overflow options deliver virtually unlimited scalability for call spikes without the need to purchase extra speech ports
- » Provides scalability by sharing thousands of inbound ports among customers
- » Proven hosting capabilities via partners, and the ability to switch to another partner's hosting environment to expand capacity as needed

4. Reliability and Availability

The final criterion for selecting a speech application vendor is the reliability of the solution. Suppose your company advertises convenient anytime access to information, transactions, and service, but your speech application isn't available when a customer calls? It won't matter how sophisticated and conversational the application is if the caller can't get through.

Voxify on Reliability

» Offers automated failover of all servers (application, database, reporting)
» 24 x 7 proactive monitoring ensures network continuity and reduces downtime
» Offers service level agreements with vendor penalties for not meeting service level requirements
» Delivers 99.9% uptime
» Offers redundant platforms housed in secure co-location facilities
» Load balances for minimal latency

As the brand voice of your company, it's imperative that the speech application is reliable. To that end, careful consideration is warranted when evaluating precisely how a speech application vendor ensures reliability and availability—whether it's a hosted solution, on premise, or a combination of both. Ask what technology and procedures are in place to avoid service disruption and ensure this meets your company's business continuity requirements.

A Reliability Checklist:

- What happens to the application in the event of an outage or failure?
- Does the vendor offer application monitoring and for what periods of time?
- Does the vendor offer service level agreements (SLAs), including penalties if SLAs are not met?

The Bottom Line

Over the past several years, self-service speech technology has overcome its earlier limitations to become highly sophisticated and adept at delivering consistent high quality and cost-effective customer service. Today it's a compelling solution for companies across all industries.

IT can help minimize risk and ensure a maximum return on investment by thoroughly appraising vendors' speech offerings in the four essential areas of competency discussed here: speed and ease of deployment, manageability, scalability, and reliability. By selecting a vendor based on these criteria, companies position themselves to deliver an optimal speech self-service experience to their customers now and in the future—whatever it may bring.

About Voxify

Voxify® enables contact centers to offer self-service for customer phone calls. Voxify Automated Agents® are speech applications that offer the lowest risk to deployment and a rapid return on investment. Built from industry-specific templates and patented conversational models, Voxify Automated Agents allow callers to speak naturally—resulting in the best customer service. Voxify offers managed services for both hosted and premise-based deployments. Millions of callers around the globe speak daily to Voxify Automated Agents when calling such companies as Continental Airlines, Hammacher Schlemmer, and Wyndham International. For more information, call 510.545.5000 or visit www.voxify.com.

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