



# They Called Me! How Interactive Outbound Speech is Revolutionizing Customer Service

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## 1 Introduction – A New Game in Town

Candace Quentin was finishing up her presentation, a day away from even thinking of packing her suitcase when she got a call from a Continental Airlines automated agent reminding her of her upcoming flight, offering to check her in, and surprisingly, offering to process a seat upgrade for her. She took the offer, and without even adding to her to do list, she was checked in with a comfortable seat in business class. Her thought of “Wow, they called me!” is being echoed across multiple industries as businesses latch onto the concept of interactive outbound notification as a way to proactively improve customer service.

Adding an array of self-service offerings that interact with customers, provide unexpected levels of service, and in some applications – increase revenue are turning a business tool of the past from something that was sometimes hung on into something customers stay on the line for. Not to mislead; for years, automatic outbound notification has been a valuable tool for businesses needing to call a lot of customers in a short period of time, without incurring the costs of live agents. However, they mostly notified customers of something and that was that. Now, we have the capability of taking a useful function that hasn’t always been relished by customers and turning it into something they want to hear, with the added benefit of building customer loyalty and increasing revenue. Read on to see how calling customers before they call you can dramatically improve your business and bottom line.

## 2 Outbound IVR/Voice Messaging Systems of the Past

Consumers have grown accustomed to automated customer service applications. Consumers are used to calling into interactive voice response (IVR) systems, using web-based customer applications, talking to contact center agents and using voice messaging. This familiarity and acceptance of alternatives to face-to-face customer service will only continue to grow stronger as Gen X and Y consumers demand always-on customer service.

Outbound notification systems, alternatively named automated voice messaging applications are a well established branch of automated customer service, and have enabled businesses to do more with less. Commonly used for, but not limited to, high volume calling to notify people of an event or provide information, or to automate a simple transaction, notification solutions are now found across all industries. For example, utility companies blast outbound messages to customers informing them of power outages and expected time to repair, and clinics use outbound messages to remind patients of upcoming appointments. Typical outbound applications have included:

- Appointment reminders
- Debt recovery

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- Delivery reminders
  - Overdue book reminders
  - Power outage notifications
  - Utility disconnect notices

Because of their tightly scripted and automated nature these systems can place a vast amount of calls in a short amount of time – something that is often cost prohibitive using live agents. They can also offload tedious tasks from small pools of workers. Outbound systems are often times used for right party verification, which is contacting and verifying the right person that an agent needs to speak to, before transferring that person to an agent.

## **2.1 While Helpful, Current Outbound Notification Systems are Limited**

When used appropriately, these systems have gotten the job done, but still have not provided the advantages of automating the breadth of work tasks that a live agent is responsible for. Compared to inbound IVR applications or calls to live agents, traditional outbound notification systems have limitations. Until recently, the primary limiting factor of these older systems has been the technology itself. Before the fairly recent application of speech recognition to the user interface of these systems, interaction with the called party was limited to the use of DTMF touchtone input, hampering any true interaction capabilities. And, although inbound speech-driven systems have been deployed for several years, there is still an immense installed base of DTMF-based systems handling both inbound and outbound applications. Outbound DTMF-based applications:

- just notify and are not interactive or conversational
- are primarily informational and not transactional or revenue-generating
- can't ask questions or get clarification from a customer
- produce low completion rates because customers cannot ask questions, get clarification and have action taken
- produce low customer satisfaction as customers still have to be transferred or call back to speak to a live agent to take action.
- can't securely authenticate that they have the correct person to deliver the notification to and are limited to touchtone response
- can't customize the application to the individual
- sometimes force the customer to have to call back to speak to an agent

Remember Candace Quentin? Prior to her wow experience with the automated agent her options would have been to remember to call in or to go online to check on her flight and check in, remember to ask for an upgrade, and check her mileage balance to see if an upgrade was even possible. With interactive outbound, that was all done for her. But what if her flight had been cancelled and the call was just to notify her of the change? Now she would have been stressed and frantic and would have had to call into a contact center and wait in queue to rebook her flight. With an interactive outbound system, that too would have been done for her.

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### 3 Interactive Outbound Speech Solutions - Changing the Game for Your Customer Service Solutions

Adding an interactive component to outbound calls reduces the limitations of automated outbound and increases the upsides by engaging your customers with actionable options. Interactive means not static, so your customers aren't just being pushed messages, but presented with options that provide value. Interactive outbound flips upside down the paradigm of customers calling your call center by letting you make the call to solve issues before they escalate, notify customers in a timely manner, create customer demand on the spot, and cement customer loyalty.

Interactive outbound notification applications:

- are closed loop and actionable where a transaction can be made in the same call
- deliver a message and offer an action at the same time
- are interactive and engaging, getting customers to want to participate on the spot
- increase customer satisfaction
- provide revenue-enhancing opportunities by proactively reaching out to customers with offers
- are transactional in nature as they draw from the same resources as available to a live agent – customer, inventory, order and other back-end databases
- can dual authenticate the called party by asking one or more identifying questions.

Outbound calls also have to reach the right person to make the transaction. For example, if a pharmacy uses interactive outbound for prescription refills, they have to comply with HIPAA rules and ask the called party an authentication question. Once the right party is identified, then the call can be customized for the called party; such as in the case of the pharmacy, providing data about the prescriptions that the customer has, the time they were last filled, option to refill, and the location of the preferred pharmacy.

Finally, interactive outbound notifications do something not practical with live assist; they enable you hit the small timeframe window of opportunity to connect with the right customers to take action with, so that you can take action on their behalf, not just leave a message. Depending upon where the call is placed, that window could be very narrow, such as calling customers around the dinner hour; typically from 4-7 PM. That dinner hour is also problematic as people may not want to be interrupted, they are cooking or eating, or they are tired, making it all the more imperative that your outbound delivery be quick, targeted and appealing.

Depending upon your business and relationships with your customers, you know that window can vary and be tight, but can you afford to staff enough agents for a busy hour that varies depending upon your outbound calling needs, or is very short? To do that is costly, inefficient, and not scalable. Plain outbound, that is limited to just leaving messages, is also not the answer as you need to contact and get action from a customer. Interactive outbound automated agents are the answer for high volume, low cost results.

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## 4 The Potential Opportunity Crosses all Verticals

The potential for doing more than providing static information for your customers is immense. It's a matter of looking at what your customers need and how to proactively offer service. You could use your live agent pool, but with interactive outbound, automated agents engage the customer to complete tedious tasks and then move on to doing more important work, potentially supplanting your agent pool, escalating the potential for you to provide superior customer service, and increasing your revenue without incurring overhead. Interactive outbound applications can be much more complex than traditional outbound, and because they are speech-driven, provide far more capabilities than DTMF-driven solutions that too often end up as a transfer to an agent.

The proactive element of interactive outbound has a direct revenue impact as well. When customers are taken care of before they perceive the need, inbound calls are eliminated.

The key to interactive outbound is access to all the back office databases needed for you to tailor a compelling offer for your customers, so interactive outbound is tailor-made for your existing customer base. Having the right data on hand about the customer enables you to make a service or an offer to be delivered by the automated agent that is both relevant and personalized, increases conversion rates.

Interactive outbound offers are particularly good for offering new services to existing customers that they perceive as value add, because when customers perceive they are getting value, they view calls from you as a service. This is especially true now as companies are prohibited from offering new services over the phone to people that they don't have a prior relationship with, so interactive outbound enables you to get the most out of marketing to your existing customer base. It is also ideal for service offerings in which you need to get the customer's agreement or confirmation to purchase, renew, upgrade, subscribe, or check-in.

Have you used an outbound notification application in the past? Are your agents ever called into service to notify customers, remind them of appointments or upcoming events, call to collect money or give order status? Now that we have speech-enabled automated agents to contact your customers in a timely manner and convince them to take action, its time to look at opportunity areas for your business. Here are some potential areas of opportunity in various verticals:

### **Education**

- Class wait list fill

### **Finance**

- Fraud prevention/tracking
- Late payment collection
- Overdraft notification and transfer of funds
- Rollover/renewal of a CD or other financial investment
- Stock notifications/buy or sell

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## **Healthcare**

- Appointment reminder and reschedule
- Disease and epidemic outbreak notifications
- Patient registration and welcome information for hospitals/clinics
- Prescription re-fill

## **Real Estate**

- Real estate availability

## **Retail**

- Auctions notifications/bid
- Newspaper or publication renewal
- Subscription service renewal
- Ticket sales of excess tickets

## **Travel**

- Flight check-in
- Flight upgrade
- Policy information
- Travel alerts

## **Telecommunications**

- Minutes refill on calling cards

## **Utilities**

- Disconnection of service warnings
- Power outage notifications

Interactive outbound is a particularly good application any time there are seats to fill or time sensitive services or items to sell. For example, notifications are optimal for auctions, concert seats, sporting event tickets, or class slots. Using outbound for time sensitive sales decreases the chance of lost revenue due to unused seats or low auction bids, while increasing customer satisfaction. This is a win-win for your business and your customer.

Interactive outbound is also a customer facing opportunity to get customers to stay connected with you as well. For example, a retail pharmacy chain felt its prescription renewal rate was too low, but decided using live agents to call customers to renew was cost prohibitive and not scalable. By employing automated agents the company is able to contact customers directly, verify it is speaking to the correct person, take the order to refill, and schedule the refill for pick-up. The results are strong. Consistently, 30% of calls that reach the intended person result in a prescription refill. These tremendous results were achieved without incurring any live agent costs, and with an increase in customer satisfaction.

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## 5 Summary

Interactive outbound services are growing in number and will continue to do so as companies try to reign in costs while building a superlative relationship with their customers. Be one of those companies. As one leg of a multi-channel approach to customer service, interactive outbound provides proactive, flexible and customizable service to your customers at just a fraction of what it would cost to attempt to do it with live agents. Check out the areas of your own business where it might make sense to automate and elevate customer service,