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Making Brands Sound Better:

How to Build a Brand-Consistent Persona for Your Automated Voice Technology

- Matt Strach, Brand Manager, GM Voices

As a first priority, the pre-recorded voice utilized on any automated telephone application should aid the technology's ultimate purpose, which is enabling and encouraging the caller to achieve their goal with as little live agent interaction as possible. Voice automation exists primarily to reduce costs; given the choice (in *most* instances), callers would prefer to speak to a live agent. But that's not reality. There is also a service component—many automated voice applications allow firms to serve customers faster and more intelligently. Automation can be a time *saver* instead of a time *waster*, but fighting the public's long-held perception continues to be a struggle.

Second to savings is the branding component, which is partly symbiotic with the primary purpose. Voice automation—the telephone—is one of many customer touchpoints for any brand. It would be unthinkable for a company to neglect its positioning in paid media, the Web or its store or office. Yet a branding disconnect prevails over the phone, often the very first point of contact with a customer.

The voice featured on a company's automated call technology should be aligned with its positioning at other touchpoints. It should affirm and complement the brand identity. It should be the vocal representation and equivalent of the brand. This is a marketing imperative to ensure a unified message to the marketplace, but it also makes business sense. By delivering a consistent, friendly and familiar voice—a virtual brand representative—callers are more inclined to accomplish goal number one: staying contained in the automation, handling their own business, and saving the company money.

A persona development project is the best way to ensure that your automated voice enhances the ROI of your technology and meets the branding requirements of your calling audience. GM Voices specializes in these projects, providing all the consulting, persona documentation and talent direction that is needed, and none that is superfluous. We pride ourselves on being good stewards of our clients' time and money. This guide outlines our thoughts on bringing to life the perfect voice persona for your automation within a reasonable timeframe and a reasonable budget.

Step 1: *Know Thyself* – Researching Overall Branding

Because a voice persona should be aligned with the company image, the process starts with an evaluation of the brand at each customer touchpoint. Advertising, sales and marketing materials, Web and social media presence, corporate communications and PR are all reviewed and compared for consistency. The marketing team is then engaged to make sure that the current brand positioning is in line with its objectives.

As the voice will be engaging customers, the company's buyer demographics, psychographics and preferences all must be factored. Much of this will be apparent following a comprehensive brand review, but additional insight is always revealed during a phone consultation.

With the brand strategy and audience determined, the persona is ready to be structured, defined, and... well, personified.

Step 2: *The Blueprint* – Persona Development and Documentation

Developing the persona helps everyone involved in the project, client and vendor, get on the same page (literally and figuratively). This step involves creating several descriptive guide documents that will inform the sound and style of the persona and the performance of the auditioning voice actors as they inhabit the role.

Use the branding research in step one to finalize a list of vocal traits/personality characteristics. Would your callers connect with a younger or more mature sound? Does that style fit with the brand? Is a warmer, "smiley" style preferred or a more professional tone? When compiling your adjectives, also consider the role of the application. Member- or loyalty-type callers may require less hand holding; a faster and more authoritative style may be appropriate. Frustrated customers calling for service may require more calmness and empathy. Combine caller needs with the brand requirements to find the proper balance.

Trait		Trait		Trait	
Casual	☐	Formal	☐	Authoritative	☐
Friendly	☑	Cordial	☐	Professional	☑
Young	☐	Mature	☐	Sophisticated	☑
Helpful	☑	Calm	☑	Polite	☑
Happy	☑	Knowledgeable	☑	Reliable	☑
Thoughtful	☑	Hip	☐	Patient	☑
Intelligent	☑	Confident	☐	Energetic	☐
Subtle	☐	Empathetic	☐	Inviting	☐

Which voice traits reflect your brand?

With the traits determined, the persona report is drafted. This master document accomplishes several things: it establishes the direction of the persona so everyone can read, refer to, and provide approval of; and it serves as the how-to manual as the voice actors prepare to read a session-ready script.

A good persona report includes all the aforementioned vocal traits, organized and displayed clearly with the reasons for their selection; an exercise called "would say/wouldn't say" that proposes scripting and grammar suggestions; a persona bio that gives the virtual personality context, clarity, and a life ("Who is this is person?"); and finally slice-of-life dialogue samples that complete the picture, including some personal information, business goals and how he/she plans to interact with callers. Typically, a robust report will range from four to six pages—plenty of quality information, with no excess to confuse the voice talent or the client.

A persona can be detailed to death at the expense of your project timeline and bottom line. How much is too much? Everyone will draw the line somewhere else. Some voice providers breeze through this process; others will bury you in an avalanche of jargon on page after page of mind-numbing excess. GM Voices offers its persona development service for any type of budget. Obviously, bigger projects and budgets warrant a more substantial deliverable. But at some point, returns will diminish. What we provide is all the information that is beneficial to the deployment of a brand-consistent persona, and nothing else. Ultimately, the final product is an enhanced *Voice Brand*, a persona to greet and guide customers, not a hefty stack of papers.

Step 3: *Hollywood* – Voice Casting and Auditions

When the persona report has been approved, it's time to shortlist the voice actors best equipped to bring the character to life. To do this properly, you should be familiar with the talent's skill set and body of work. Every voice actor has a default sound—their standard "read style." But the purpose of the persona report is so they can adjust their delivery to meet the needs of the client's brand. At GM Voices, our voice actors are talented professionals, many with stage and screen experience. Any particular actor's range will vary; the voice provider should have a sense of whether the talent considered can "become" the persona. Also, different voice providers will offer talent of varying levels of experience and range. During GM Voices' talent review process, a large component in deciding whether to bring a voice into our stable is whether he/she can assimilate persona reports, take direction and change characters.

GM Voices usually chooses four to six voices for consideration. Sometimes a "gender alternate" (auditioning one male voice if a female voice is determined, for example) will be added for consideration, if only to gauge the assuredness of the client's direction. An in-context script segment will be used in the recording session—it's important that the client review an audio file that will be a true representation of how the voice would sound on the actual application.

Before the session, the auditioning talent will review the persona report with the session director and a member of our creative team. This ensures an authentic, brand-consistent performance.

When each audition has been edited into a crisp audio file, the creative team will review and compare the performances. After deliberation, one voice is endorsed to become the new voice persona. Then, all the audition tracks are delivered to the client with our final recommendation. The final selection is in the customer's hands, however. In most cases, the client will agree with the recommendation; other times, they will select another voice. There really is no wrong answer. Only the performances that capture the spirit of the persona will be considered and delivered for review. And sometimes, the final decision can be difficult—they're all good!

Step 4: *Going Live* – Deploying the Voice and Handling Updates

Once a voice actor has been chosen, it's time to bring the new persona to the calling public. Implementing the persona and maintaining a world-class *Voice Brand* calls for ease and economy in voice prompt management. It's to your benefit to find a single vendor that can manage all your voice files and orders, can maintain a uniform sound and style, and can deliver all your language requirements. One such vendor is GM Voices.

To proceed with recording, session-ready scripts must be prepared. To ensure the success of the persona, and, indeed, the experience of the application as a whole, great care must be taken to craft the voice user interface (VUI). GM Voices offers both high-level and in-depth scripting and VUI design services, for everything from simple greetings (auto attendant) to complex IVR systems. Consider a professional solution if you don't have an expert on staff.

For the best playback, be aware of your required file formats and any special instructions (silence at the beginning or end of the prompts, for example). The voice prompts need to complement the architecture of your technology, and sometimes that involves some trial-and-error with your voice provider.

Your company, its offerings and customer service are dynamic and evolving. At some point after the initial voice deployment, you will need voice prompt updates. It's essential to your customer experience that you choose a vendor and voice talent that will be available for the long haul as your application grows and changes. This is but one reason why GM Voices contracts its talent long term and offers many in weekly recording sessions (a talent records on the same day each week). This allows an easy-to-plan production cycle for a low cost. Since we bundle orders in the weekly session, we pass along the savings associated with talent booking and studio setup. The application will stay current and relevant, because next week is always there, so to speak.

Finally, choosing a single-source, professional voice provider keeps the voice prompts consistent—both from performance and technical perspectives. At GM Voices, if a persona report is used for the first batch of first recordings, it will be referenced for every subsequent order. Previous orders will be reviewed: talent performance, pacing, cadence, volume, special instructions, etc. These are just the safeguards and quality assurance that keep the persona consistent and natural for continued customer-facing interaction.

The creation of a unique and natural-sounding persona is one of the most important elements of projecting a clear and professional *Voice Brand* to your callers. Though often the domain of telephony or IT departments, and not marketing and branding teams, the automated phone experience is an essential customer touchpoint that should be aligned with the brand investment in other contact channels.

GM Voices has a long history of enhancing the automated voice experience in a way that keeps customers content to achieve their goal within the technology, saving time and money, and all the while sounding just as your enterprise should.