TOP 12 TIPS FOR MULTI-LANGUAGE IVR VOICE PROMPTS

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Introduction

The subtle challenges of communicating with customers via an IVR system are greatly magnified when implementing voice prompts in multiple languages concurrently. Maintaining consistency in meaning, avoiding cultural minefields, and establishing credibility and familiarity across different geographic regions are the main challenges, but there are also numerous process and practical execution issues that are encountered during implementation. This Top Twelve list offers tips to ensure that your multi-language IVR implementation is effectively supported by professionally recorded voice prompts.

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1. Begin by identifying all script reviewers and stakeholders up front

The final script should reflect input and validation across a broad array of stakeholders. This will ensure organization-wide buy in and the identification of potential errors and cultural/language missteps. The stakeholders should be identified upfront, and a process for review defined and communicated at the onset of the project. To the extent the voice application is customer-facing, at least one stakeholder from Marketing or Corporate Communication should be included.

The following policy questions should also be answered?

- Who will review and validate the initial script?
- Should the translated scripts be reviewed and validated before recording? If so, by whom?
- Who will be performing the final audit of the recorded speech?
- Who has the final say in the event of disputes?

The more that it is agreed upon at the outset of the project, the easier the process will become, and the less likely the project team will need to scramble to deal with last-minute changes.

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2. Start in your native language and work from there

Like the Rosetta Stone, your script will act as a language bridge. As such, the script should be meticulously reviewed and validated in English before it is translated into one or more languages. English is preferred, as most voice talents, translators, and other related service providers speak some level of this language. If providing English is impractical, the primary language of the country in which the organization is headquartered can be employed as the basis for translation.

Better to discover any issues once and correct them, than have the issues multiplied across the globe. Double-check any phone numbers, e-mail or web addresses for accuracy. Is the brand name spelled correctly, does everyone know how to properly pronounce it? Which names and phrases should NOT be translated? Your script is about to travel the world, has it packed a toothbrush?

Also, once the script is translated into all languages, it is helpful to retain the English (or other base language) text in the same script document. A script organized in this fashion serves as a map for the person installing the prompts within the call flow. This person would otherwise struggle working with scripts and audio files in languages other than his/her native tongue. This "reference" text can also serve as a guide to voice talents and a voice firm's audio editors to clarify elements of the script that might be in question.

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3. Use a standardized script format

To make things easier, it's important to use a standard script format, dividing the document into sections (for example, tabs in a spreadsheet) for each language required. Such a format maximizes the chances of highly accurate output throughout the recording, editing, and formatting processes. If you plan to outsource the project to a professional voice services firm, this unifies and streamlines the communication and distribution process across multiple voice translators, voice talents, editors and proofreaders.

Be sure to separate any instructions relating to pronunciation, special treatment for certain prompts, phone programming notes, and other information from the text to be recorded. This prevents confusion for both the voice talent and anyone performing post-production editing. Name each of your voice prompts with unique and identifiable/easily searchable file names, perhaps including an extension denoting the specific language. This ensures easy and accurate identification during AND after the production process.

If there are any words that could potentially be mispronounced by the voice talents, provide a phonetic representation, also known as pronouncers, in separate column adjacent to the prompt. A pronouncer is a text string like the one you might find in a dictionary – for example: "instructions" would be represented as "in STRUCK shuns", with the accented syllable capitalized. Note that this may be tricky for the main script provider to do for non-English scripts, so if they are critical, this person may need to rely on native language resources.

Many professional voice services firms have a dedicated phone line for recording pronunciations. A native speaker can call in to the specified line or extension and record the phrases in question at least twice. These recordings are then passed on to the voice talents, which often works better than just providing written phonetic representations.

For more detailed on pronunciation standards and processes, please request our separate document: ***Global Pronunciation Best Practices and Processes.***

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4. Be clear on what should be spoken in English or the native language.

One fundamental question that requires clarity is whether certain kinds of text should be recorded in English or the native language. The goal is to make the script as understandable as possible to the native speaker, so in general we believe text should be spoken in the native language, with exceptions that should be agreed to by all stakeholders. These exceptions include, but are not limited to company names, product/service names, web URLs, e-mail addresses, and other specials terms and phrases.

There may be company standards that dictate that Company and product/services names should be spoken in English. There is also the issue of acronyms. It should be clear whether or not a given acronym should be spoken letter by letter, or as one single word; and this might differ by geographic region or language. In each case, the script writer should consult with the appropriate marketing stakeholder, which in larger organizations could be Marketing or Corporate Communications

Website URL's and e-mail addresses are generally spoken in the native language, including their individual elements, such as "www', "." (or dot), and "/" (forward slash), unless one or more of the elements are a company or product/service name that has been designated as needing to be spoken in English. For addresses for physical locations, the default practice is to speak US-based addresses in English (or in the language of the country in which the address resides0, unless otherwise indicated, including street numbers and zip codes.

There are oftentimes exceptions to the guidelines above in certain languages and geographies, but these guidelines represent our default recommendations. Amazing Voice has a written set of default assumptions that we use as a starting point for discussion with our clients. The following document can be obtained on request: **"Language Standards for E-mails, Websites, and Other Elements".**

5. Look for differences in language conventions

When creating scripts, it's important that you are mindful of the fact that words, phrases and time of day references don't always translate the same from one language to the next. As an illustration, some languages reference time using AM or PM while others denote time by using afternoon, evening or morning. It's also important to pay attention to the adjectives you use in the script to make sure they align with the noun they modify, as some languages such as Spanish denote gender based on word choices. Deviations from these particulars are not only a distraction, but can negatively impact your credibility with non-English callers.

6. Employ professional translation services to ensure accuracy and cross-language consistency

The best way to ensure your translations are accurate is to use a professional translation service. Translations that are provided by the "guy in the office who speaks Spanish" are rarely accurate when used for voice applications.

Under no circumstances should you use a computer-generated translator, like Google Translate. IVR dialogue is interactive and contextual. While computers have made great strides through Artificial Intelligence (AI) in this area, they are still limited relative to human translators, who understand this intuitively. Don't trust a computer to accurately translate your thoughts, meanings and dreams into another language.

Ideally, use the same vendor for translation as for recording. Having one party provide both services cuts down on errors and makes the process go smoother and faster, particularly if the translator and voice talent for a given language have been working together of a long period of time.

Also, many professional voice service firms give you the opportunity to examine and approve translations before the actual recording. This is one way to ensure that the recordings meet the requirements of all of your organization's stakeholders. While a professional firm will consistently provide accurate translations, you may have colleagues who have strongly held opinions about language issues, so it is worth at least requiring this approval the first time you work with such individuals. When confidence is built with all stakeholders over time, going straight to recording takes a time consuming step out of the process.

Experienced translators can "read between the lines" in order to convey meaning, not just literal translations. Some phrases translate accurately, in other cases it's **the ideas** that need to be translated instead of the actual words. This is particularly true for script that contain scientific, medical, or technical terms, so

finding translators that are versed in specific industries is often a necessity. If the translator does not possess this skill and you suspect a certain English word or phrase will not translate well into a given language, it is helpful to run that word or phrase by someone within your organization who speaks the target language natively.

Also, accurate translations are critical for long legal statements, such as financial disclosures and privacy rights statements, which are becoming more prevalent internationally. In short, rely on the pros to keep you out of trouble.

7. Agree on a process for handling translation disputes

Language translation has a subjective element, and the quality of translation varies depending on the level of expertise of the provider. As a result, disputes may arise with respect to the translation of a given word, phrase or sentence. This happens quite frequently particularly when a non-professional translator is used, or if the translation is mandated for legal reasons, as with legal disclaimers, privacy statements, or financial disclosures.

In general, voice talents generally will record exactly what is given to them, so this is the expectation that you should have going in to any voice project. However, voice talents will sometimes make minor revisions on their own to varying degrees if they see errors, which may or may not be problematic. They might also make suggestions back to the requestor.

All of these factors point to the need to be clear with all parties on what the policies and processes will be if translation disputes arise. This includes answers to the following questions:

- When encountering an error, should the voice talent:
  1) Record the text as is?
  2) Stop and ask for clarification?
  3) Make what he/she believes is the right correction?
  4) Provide alternatives?

- Who is involved in resolving the dispute, and who is the ultimate decision-maker?

- How should associated costs, including potential re-recordings, be budgeted, accounted, and paid for?

- What is the voice provider's policy for re-records – in terms or price and lead time?

This also points again to the need for professional translation, as well as customer validation of the originating script. The errors associated with poor translations breaks the voice talent's flow and concentration, forcing her or him to start and stop, and ultimately resulting in increased costs and missed deadlines.

8. Employ voiceover professionals, not internal voices

It is vital to use professional voice actors, since they have the skill set required to pronounce all words correctly while also maintaining a high level of recording quality. These professionals are trained to maintain consistent style, pace, energy level, and pronunciation throughout the life of the IVR system, which will lead to a better calling experience for your customers.

For a large IVR project with 4, 6, 12 voices or more, it's even more important to use professionals. Unless you can use an internal native speaker to validate the work of each voice talent in every language, you run the risk of providing a poor user experience for your callers – including mispronunciations, bad recording levels and quality, and inability to inflect correctly for desired effect and accurate responses.

Also, beware the "professional" who decided to get a USB microphone from the corner store and posted a few demos on a "pay to play' voice website. Be sure that the voice talent has been vetted by a credible voice services firm, and ask how long she or he has been working full time in the voice over field.

9. Establish credibility and familiarity by using native speakers

It is critical to employ only native speakers for all voice prompts. Even the best trained voice talents have trouble sounding credible in a second language, or even a regional variant of the same language (Brazilian Portuguese vs. European Portuguese, for example). Additionally, native speakers are innately aware of cultural sensitivities, which can help your organization prevent embarrassing mistakes from occurring that could damage your organization's reputation. If you are being provided voice talents from a professional voice services firm, be sure, to ask specifically if the voice talent in question for a given language is a native speaker. Oftentimes, voice talents will represent themselves as speaking multiple languages, but end up delivering prompts that sound inauthentic, or worse yet, that contain inaccuracies if they are speaking their second or third language.

You can further mitigate risks by using native speakers who are still "in-country" – i.e., they live in the country in which they learned their primary language, as opposed to having moved to the country in which your organization is headquartered. For example, a native-born Lithuanian who has moved to the United States may lose her/his accent, pick up American inflections over time, and become less attuned to cultural nuances in her/his home country.

10. Match the right regional dialect to the right target audience

Different parts of the world use diverse dialects when it pertains to a given language. Make sure you don't just choose Spanish, but the regionally appropriate version of Spanish such as Latin American, Castilian or something even more country-specific like Chilean Spanish. The same is true for other languages like French (as spoken in Canada, France, Belgium, or Switzerland), German (Bavarian, Austrian), and Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese?).

Most recording companies will ask about a dialect or region if one is not specified. Some dialects are reasonably interchangeable (i.e. Parisian French vs. Belgian French), but it's wise to be regionally specific as to where your recordings are going to be heard and by whom. Such companies can also consult with you regarding the desired level of formality in terms of speaking style. It is more often than not that an English speaker will not be able to discern between a more formal, "sophisticated" speaking style and one that is more informal when evaluating voice talents speaking other languages.

The same guiding principles here hold true for translation as well as recording.

Just as there are different phrases, spellings, and work choices between US and UK English, the same holds true for Canadian vs. European French, and other language pairs. As voice talents generally record what they see on the script, it's likely that the voice talent won't pick up these differences when they record, and the target caller will perceive any mismatches here as inauthentic.

14

11. Choose bilingual voices for consistent delivery and streamlined management

A bilingual talent possesses the ability to speak in two or more different languages without a discernable accent. There a number of benefits to employing such voice actors:

- They will naturally employ the same style, intonation, and pace across languages.

- Any coaching and feedback you provide will be acted on across languages.

- Itis administratively smoother. Interaction will be more streamlined in the event of script changes, clarification of pronunciations, etc.

A bilingual voice talent is also more likely to identify translation errors and grammatical hiccups in a script. Just as importantly, she or he can more effectively communicate issues and changes to stakeholders irrespective of what languages they speak. This will result in better quality recordings, free from minor mistakes that could lead to confusion with callers and reflect poorly on your organization.

12. Use one process, one vendor, for all languages

There are many steps in the process of creating multi-language voice prompts, including script review, recording, sound editing, file naming, archiving, and delivery. Every step creates opportunities for errors, and differences in how each step is executed can lead to a frustratingly inefficient process. It could be a small inconsistency – for example, your Dutch prompts sound louder than your English prompts, or your German prompts have 5 milliseconds more silence leading into the first word than your Spanish prompts.

In addition to naming and archiving ALL recordings in a consistent fashion, using standards such as above, will facilitate easy search and retrieval for those recordings even years later – should they be lost, corrupted, or needed for reference and revision. The best way to treat each language the same is to use a professional voice services firm who executes their processes the same way, every time.