



PASSENGER TRANSPORT

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Not Your Father's Phone Tree: The Future of IVRs in Transit

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People hate automated phone systems, right? When was the last time you heard someone say, "I called my bank and, instead of a person, I got to talk to this wonderful computer?"

If callers liked the current type of computerized phone systems, sometimes called phone trees, we wouldn't see web sites and businesses dedicated to circumventing them like Get Human (<www.gethuman.com>) and Bringo (<www.nophonetrees.com>).

Despite their drawbacks, though, transit call centers could not provide the level of service they do today without Interactive Voice Response systems.

So, how can we get past this "can't-live-with-'em,-can't-live-without-'em" relationship?

Part of the solution will include improving the computerized phone interfaces to make them more natural. For example, agencies are increasingly replacing old touch-tone data entry ("Enter the bus number using your phone keypad. If you need to enter a letter, press...") with speech recognition software ("Tell me, which bus route would you like?").

The real key to dramatically improving transit customer service will be technologies that allow IVRs to provide customer-pleasing services not possible with legacy phone tree systems.

Following is a list of the new services that LogicTree believes that technology advancements will enable. Some of these services are available today, while some will become available in the not-too-distant future.

Available today: Automated Trip Planning using speech recognition. Advances in speech

recognition technology have created the ability to fully automate a transit trip itinerary using only a phone. This has dramatically decreased caller hold times and made information available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. For example, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's RideGuide can plan point-to-point trips from a more than 500,000 streets, landmarks, and intersections in the WMATA service area.

Coming tomorrow: Transit concierge services. Imagine a transit trip planning service that goes beyond navigating from one address to another. This service could tell you not just how to get to an address, but what restaurants, movie theaters, or other businesses are in the area. This service would leverage advances in Global Positioning Satellite system data to create public-private partnerships that make transit information part of a larger information service for riders.

Available today: Sending text messages to cellular phones. IVR systems now on the market increasingly allow riders to get information via text message in addition to phone calls. This is possible because many riders use cellular phones that are capable of much more than traditional landline phones. We believe that outbound text message alerts will increasingly allow agencies to alert their riders when trouble strikes.

Coming soon: Sending maps, pictures, and other video-rich data. With the growth of embedded GPS features and powerful cellular handsets, riders will no longer need to fumble through their purses and pockets to write down an itinerary. IVR systems will be able to send maps, pictures, and step-by-step directions provided by back-end transit information systems. Also, these maps will be interactive—you will be able to change them on your phone and receive updated results.

Available today: Personalizing information

to make calls faster. In December 2006, Florida DOT launched its personalized 511 travel information service, My Florida 511 (<www.myflorida511.com>). This service allows frequent callers to specify a travel route, such as a commute, using a web interface. When these people call 511, the system recognizes their phone number; they can simply say "My Commute" and hear traffic information for only the roads they are traveling. Transit agencies can use the same technology to provide updates on system delays or outages.

Coming soon: Integrating transit and traffic information to provide a complete picture. Transit agencies, through their call centers, and state DOTs, through the 511 initiative, have been pursuing separate paths of providing information to a single market. Imagine how powerful it would be if both parties would come together to create a unified portal capable of addressing travelers' basic questions:

- What modes of transport can I use to get to where I need to go?
- When will I get there?
- How do I do it (step-by-step)?

The 511 service in the San Francisco Bay area, which includes a web-based trip planner, has taken some initial steps in this direction. South Florida 511 will incorporate a IVR system for local bus information, and soon the proposed Los Angeles Motorist Aid and Traveler Information System will include a phone-based transit trip planner in addition to a 511 system.

The uniting themes of these coming services and technologies is to give riders access to the information they need, when they need it, and making it accessible by the communications mode they have at hand: cell phone, web browser, personal digital assistant, or some other communications device that hasn't even been invented yet.

The goal is to make transit a more useful service, and a more integral part of riders' lives.