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May/June 2005

Innovations: Speech Technology with Impact

By Nancy Jamison

From the editor: Welcome to Innovations – Speech Technology with Impact. Normally in each issue we have a section for notable press releases, but over time this has grown redundant with our Speech Technology Magazine NewsBlasts. So starting this month we are replacing press releases with a new column on innovations or speech technology with impact. That is, anything that people or companies in the speech arena announce that has the potential for making an impact of some sort, be it regulatory, technological or application-oriented. Whatever the announcement, we hope you see something you missed, or something that sparks your interest.

At the recent SpeechTEK West event, vendors were out in full force showing their wares. It was a good chance for me to look around to see if anyone was doing anything new or different, but more importantly, doing something that would make a difference in this industry. This was a tough call, as many vendors briefed me on new products and applications due out later this year, but no immediate announcements were truly revolutionary. However, for this first edition, I have found some applications announced prior to the show, which are notable for solving problems, including ClickFox, who won the Best of Monitoring and Evaluation Tools for Call Centers award at the AVIOS 2005 show.

ClickFox



ClickFox, a relative newcomer to the speech field, came to my attention through one of their partners. What ClickFox does is bring to the table a banquet of analytics that are served as side dishes at many vendors' tables. Whereas every vendor provides some form of data, business or statistical analysis of what is happening in their system or application, ClickFox takes a holistic approach to analyzing the ecosystem of the application – pitting analytics against business purpose. ClickFox calls this Customer Behavior Intelligence (CBI), and they define this as “the ability to define, measure and analyze actual customer behavior in aggregate within a system in the context of the enterprise’s business objectives.” Unlike CRM statistics, which look at customer data and transaction statistics, or basic IVR statistics that show how a caller entered or exited the system, CBI ties these together, along with the business objective, the systems or applications implemented to achieve the objective, and the actual behavior of the customer. ClickFox does this across all customer service channels regardless of whether it is a speech-enabled IVR, Kiosk or Web application, CRM application, or other channel.

By comparing actual usage against business objectives, as reflected in the system structure, ClickFox can pinpoint drop-off points or areas that cause hiccups in customer usage, enabling an enterprise to correct a call flow, improve instructions for the user, or simplify an application so that usage is increased, customers are happier, and cost savings is achieved. For example, in one application in which a company implemented a customer service speech application that started out using natural language open-ended prompts, callers who didn't provide correct input were being routed to a more directed dialog to continue. Because the customer had been speaking freely to the system in the previous step, the transition to directed dialog was confusing. If still confused, they were then shifted to an error handling dialog, causing further frustration and zero outs or hang-ups. By utilizing ClickFox's analytics, the company determined that in initially setting caller expectations that open-ended responses were ok, the subsequent, more constrained dialog wasn't

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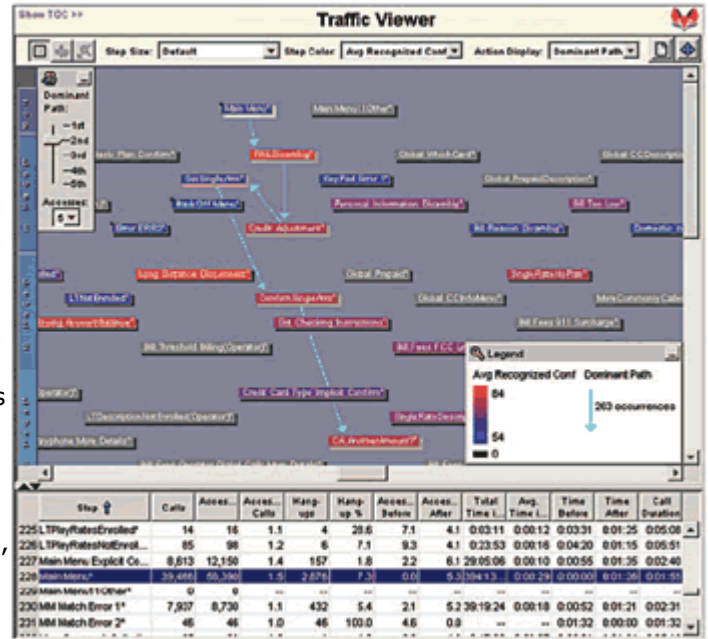
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working.

ClickFox customers use CBI to do all those things contact center marketing gurus love to crow about – improve ROI, increase performance optimization of enterprise interaction channels, increase transaction rates, and reduce customer churn. But they do it in a fashion that is complimentary and somewhat different than what is out there today. Rather than look at after-the-fact transaction data on what the customer bought, or statistics on how long the customer was in the system, or where they went, ClickFox looks at what should be happening versus what is happening, modeling customer behavior against system states and transitions, Web links and pages, or call menu options, so that an enterprise can tune applications to eliminate bottlenecks, improve the usage of the system, and increase click-thrus and conversions on interactive advertising, application flow and transaction completion.



Sometimes it's a small needed change that is uncovered, such as consistency in obtaining customer input – does the system ask the caller to enter # after one set of data and not another, for example? This happened in one customer case where the use of # was required at one step, but put the system in error mode if the customer ended with # at another step. Sometimes it's more complex, such as understanding why an automated application works well at a headquarters location, but not at a branch. By combining users' interactions with system structure, ClickFox allows clients to visualize how to improve users' interactions with systems at each step of the application process. ClickFox provides clients with automated recommendations for tuning self service options.

ClickFox also allows for 'what if' scenarios in reporting, so that an enterprise can input additional business or customer data into ClickFox reports to see better how performance relates to actual customer behavior. For example, a client may want to see how a certain user population performs a certain task based on customer data.

What is so innovative about ClickFox? It's the ability to look at the entire customer interaction system, across multiple channels and come up with recommendations to improve flow and achieve business objectives, no matter which systems are involved, and then to play what if games by adding additional business intelligence to the mix. After all, even if it's all about the customer and improving the customer experience, a business still needs to balance that against reducing costs and automating applications, and I think ClickFox can, in order to more easily facilitate that.

ZVOX



Speech synthesis and text-to-speech (TTS) are oftentimes the poor step-children in the speech technology world, despite solving the vast problem of providing verbal output of textual information in automated applications. I continue to see text-to-speech and speech synthesis used in innovative and beneficial ways, some of which solve critical niche problems.

This month I looked at a product from ZVOX, who is using speech synthesis in a little device called the ZVOX Digital Audio Player. These units are being used by international humanitarian, government, and non-government organizations to provide life-saving and life-changing messages to the over three billion illiterate people worldwide, who are poor, undereducated, and often difficult to reach.

Using speech synthesis from Sensory, the units are rechargeable from AC/DC power sources or can be solar-powered, with a battery life of 25 hours, making them useful in the field. ZVOX allows organizations to train, educate or disseminate critical information to a wide range of people. For example, last year the units were used in Afghanistan to educate people about the upcoming

presidential elections. An audio-based civic education program was introduced, whereby dramas, songs, interviews, and stories in Dari and Pashto languages were recorded on the players and distributed across the country, reaching over 500,000 people, many of them illiterate women. Government officials credited this work with significantly increasing voter turnout in former Taliban strongholds. A similar voter education program was used by the Iraq Election Commission in that country's recent elections with similar success.

Further, ZVOX products are being used in the fight against the terrible pandemic of HIV/AIDS, which is threatening the very life of nations in Africa and Asia. In this case, the Digital Audio Players are being used to provide health information in the prevention of these diseases and provide treatment and care information to millions of people across the continent of Africa. Programs that incorporate the ZVOX players are significantly helping change the stigma associated with AIDS; encouraging people to be tested and furthering education and training of lay medical personnel. This basic technology is extending the "last mile" of information.

Have a cool or noteworthy announcement? Please email me at nsj@jamisons.com

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