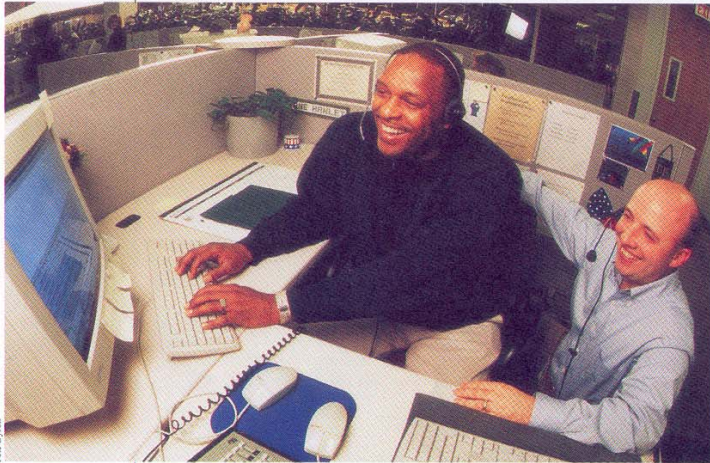


“How may I help you?”

AT&T Consumer is taking customer care back to the future where speech-recognition technology blends with courteous and competent help customers get for the asking.

Already, each day thousands of callers to AT&T Consumer Customer Care reach a pleasant-sounding and helpful talking computer instead of an interactive voice response (IVR) system's series of menus and prompts.



Pete Bryson
Project manager Barry Parker, right, and rep Bob Middleton test functions of AT&T Consumer's new computerized "How May I Help You" customer self-service system.

The *How May I Help You* (HMIHY) system, based on AT&T Labs technology, literally listens to, understands and responds to customers' spoken inquiries.

"We're programming computers to answer calls and respond to basic requests," says Doug Shurts, who leads the effort to make AT&T Consumer's self-service systems easier to use. "That frees reps for more complex customer issues."

HMIHY has the largest vocabulary and is the most accurate and conversational voice-response system of its kind. Its life-like voice quality even

says Barry Parker, AT&T program manager-Voice Technology and Natural Language Services.

Ask and you shall receive

Unlike typical IVR systems that require callers to winnow menu choices and punch a telephone keypad for information, HMIHY users simply say what they want. Instantly, the system recognizes key words and phrases and routes the call to the appropriate database or to a service rep. If the request is too general or vague, the system asks the caller for additional information.

People who dislike punching keys will love HMIHY. A senior citizen who participated in the service trial said, "I find this (HMIHY) much easier to use than pushing buttons. It will help AT&T."

Joy Wona, a customer care rep at the Consumer Sales Work Center Laboratory in Morristown, N.J., helped program HMIHY and "tutored the computer" on routing customer calls to prepare it to handle calls solo. Foreseeing benefits for her colleagues as well, she says, "Customers can get the routine information they need very simply and quickly, and that lightens the load on reps and makes our jobs a little more manageable."

Kinder, gentler IVR scripts

Meanwhile, AT&T Consumer Customer Care is improving its IVR menus and scripts to speed and simplify its customers' interactions. Evelyn Williams of the AT&T Consumer Self Service group and Kim Friedman-Muller of AT&T Labs led a team that studied thousands of customer calls and conducted extensive tests with IVR users. A new and improved IVR menu now helps customers find and understand the most-requested billing and service information.

The team also modified the IVR script to make it more informal and natural. For example, instead of, "You requested credit for...", the friendlier-sounding scripting would say, "Thanks. You told me you wanted credit for..."

"It's a subtle difference, but our customer-satisfaction surveys indicate customers prefer that personal touch," Williams says. "And, in the end, they feel better about AT&T and the care we provided."

To advance high-tech customer care, AT&T Labs is developing life-like computer-generated talking heads that speak to customers from their computers. Pairing a computer-generated face with a friendly, natural-sounding voice will add to the customer's comfort level.

"We're designing our automated systems to be conversational, friendly