IVR—

A Pharmacy That Never Closes

Interactive voice response gives service 24/7 for patients, doctors, and pharmacists

By Bruce Kneeland

For pharmacists, an increasingly wide range of technology is available—so much that it can be challenging to choose the most useful and the best investment. If you listen Bob Graul, RPh, MBA, he'll tell you that for many independent community pharmacists, the easiest and most affordable technology available in a time of increased workloads and tight margins is an interactive voice response (IVR) system.

Graul, owner of Rancho Santa Fe Pharmacy in Rancho Santa Fe, California, expressed those views as one of two featured panelists on IVR during the NCPA Technology Seminar held at the NCPA Annual Convention in Las Vegas last October. (The IVR session of the seminar was cosponsored by McKesson Pharmacy Systems and TeleManager Technologies, Inc.)

Copanelist Tim Larsen, RPh, owner of three stores in the Yelm, Washington, area, echoed Graul's sentiments. After installing his IVR system, it was so effective that he was concerned that his phone system had crashed.

"My staff and I really did wonder if something had happened to the phone system," Larsen told an audience of more than 200 that participated in the IVR portion of the technology seminar. The reason? The phone was ringing so infrequently compared to what it was like before he installed the system.

OVERLOOKED TECHNOLOGY?

For its proponents, IVR seems to be a technology that has been overlooked by independent pharmacy owners. The IVR market sprang to life in the late 1990s, and found instant success with chain pharmacies. The technology seemed ideal for organizations grappling with high workloads and pharmacy staffs that were experiencing increasing stress. The early technology was functional, but most industry observers agree that the operation of these

IVR Options Continue to Evolve

IVR, short for interactive voice response, is a tele-phonic technology in which someone uses a touch-tone telephone to interact with a database to acquire information from or enter data into the database. IVR technology does not require human interaction over the telephone as the user's interaction and access with the database is predetermined by what the IVR system will allow. For example, banks and credit card companies use IVR systems so that their customers can receive up-to-date account information instantly and easily without having to speak directly to a person. IVR technology is also used to gather information, as in the case of telephone surveys in which the user is prompted to answer questions by pushing the numbers on a touch-tone telephone.

The latest systems use natural language speech recognition to interpret the questions that the person wants answered. The newest trend is guided speech IVR, which integrates live human agents into the design and workflow of the application to help the speech recognition with human context.

Other innovations include the ability to speak complex and dynamic information such as an e-mail, news report, or weather information using text-to-speech (TTS). TTS is computer-generated synthesised speech and is no longer the robotic voice people associate with computers. Real voices are used to create the speech in tiny fragments that are glued together before being played to the caller.

Source: Webopedia computer dictionary (www.webopedia.com)

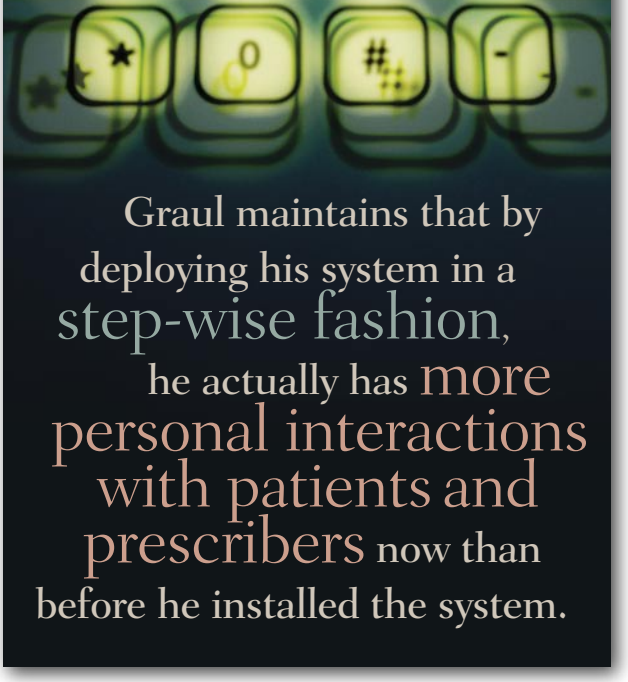
systems often frustrated elderly patients and seemed to take away from the personal touch. Many independent pharmacists heard these complaints from patients and immediately formed the opinion that they would forgo the productivity benefits of IVR and instead continue to build their practice by answering their phone personally and striving to provide more personal attention.

The perceived difficulty of early IVR systems was on the mind of many in the audience who expressed opinions to the two panelists during the seminar. Graul responded by saying that he understands their sentiments, but that there are a variety of ways to address those concerns. He says that the first thing to realize is that modern IVR systems can be as accommodating as their owners want them to be.

"Many large corporations program their phone systems to avoid personal contact with consumers, but I work just the opposite way with my IVR," he says. Graul maintains that by deploying his system in a step-wise fashion, he actually has more personal interactions with patients and prescribers now than before he installed it.

Graul encourages pharmacists to work with their IVR vendor to introduce the system as an added benefit to help callers understand how it will help them work more effectively with the pharmacy. For example, Graul says you should create bag stuffers, placards, and statement stuffers explaining the system, and coach callers on how to bypass the IVR to get to a person. Menu selections can be offered with the zero-out option being mentioned first. Special phone numbers can be offered that go directly to the IVR. And for the particularly reluctant users, some options, provide a caller ID function that can allow specific tagged callers to bypass the system and have the phone ring right through to the pharmacy. Graul says his system even has an option that announces on a speaker that a doctor is on the line when the doctor has opted-out of the IVR and asked to be put through directly to the pharmacy.

The IVR session of NCPA's Technology Seminar was moderated by Bill Lockwood, founder and publisher of *Computer Talk* magazine and executive director of the American Society for Automation in Pharmacy (ASAP). During his introductory remarks, Lockwood said that while the productivity benefits of IVR have long been understood, much of the attention on IVR in recent months revolves around advanced features that allow the systems to actually become sales builders. For example, most IVR systems sold today provide a fax service that lets patients know when no more refills are authorized, and asks the patient if they'd like the pharmacy to contact the doctor for additional refills. If the patient responds "yes," the IVR, working in concert with the pharmacy management system, automatically generates a fax to the prescriber requesting a refill authorization.



Other features currently being offered are "will-call" and "compliance" calling features. According to TeleManager Technologies, Inc., some of their clients using these two features indicated that the number of refills they process actually increased 5 percent or more when they began using them. These programs can be carefully set up under parameters the pharmacy develops and generate calls to people reminding them of prescriptions already in the will-call bin or; on an opt-in basis, that they have a prescription on file that is due to be refilled.

Many independent pharmacists are also beginning to realize that another way to serve patients and reduce the number of phone calls coming into the pharmacy is to offer an Internet refill option. Working in much the same manner as a telephone-based IVR, these systems make it possible for consumers to place refill requests over the Internet. Graul says that his TeleManager system provides pharmacies without a Web page of their own an opportunity to direct their customers to a special Web site, www.pharmacyshopper.com, and then find their own pharmacy's refill request page by store name and ZIP code. From this page they can order refills and take full advantage of other IVR services.

Bruce Kneeland is the founder of *PharmacyConnections* a specialty services/consulting company based in Royersford, Pennsylvania that is dedicated to helping small chain and independent pharmacies operate more profitably. He can be reached at 610-792-2477; or, via e-mail at bruce@pharmacyconnections.com.