

# What's next



## Enterprise

# Building trust with a virtual assistant voice

What does a pastrami sandwich, debit card fraud and customer service have to do with selecting a voice for your virtual assistant? Dan's pastrami story tells how trust can be built with an easy and successful customer service interaction.

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Credibility and trust are instrumental in ensuring consumer loyalty. A customer who believes you and trusts you, works for you. They champion your brand and products and bring other folks with them. For a voice-enabled application this puts a lot of pressure on the virtual

assistant's persona, how they sound and what they say. As we automate more and more, the virtual assistant is becoming the first "person" a customer talks to at your company, and it's usually because they have a problem.

Before we dive further in, let me tell a story about a pastrami sandwich, debit card fraud, and how a company won me over with their customer service.

## My pastrami sandwich story

*On a day like any other, after I made my way through an entire hot pastrami sandwich (it was a cheat day I swear), I waddled back to the office to continue working. On the way, my phone buzzed in my pocket and a text notification told me that someone withdrew \$500 using an ATM in the Upper East Side of NYC, quite far from the Financial District where I was. As I looked at the screen in mild shock, another text showed up for another \$500 from a different location. Panic set in, I immediately stopped waddling to make a phone call, and the person behind me walked right into me, letting out a few choice words as he charged past.*

*By the time I called the number listed in the texts, thousands of dollars were gone from my checking account, withdrawn from various ATMs around Manhattan. And, it was the first of the month, meaning rent was due. My stomach churned at seeing my checking account drained and was only amplified by that greasy pastrami sandwich. Yet, by the grace of excellent customer service, my problem was no longer a problem after only five minutes on the phone. Card cancelled, replacement on its way, and money refunded like nothing happened.*

## How may I help you today?

I tell this story to drive home how much trust can be built with an easy and successful customer service interaction. All the advertising in the world could not even attempt to build the same level of trust that was instilled in me from that single phone call. Not only did they solve my problem quickly and with little effort on my part, but they took a customer problem and used it as an opportunity to increase my perception of and trust in their brand. And, it all began with an automated voice saying, "How may I help you today?"

Is there a secret recipe when selecting a voice for your virtual assistant? What's the magic mix of character, pacing and tone that absolutely guarantees a voice that is credible and trustworthy? People form initial judgments on a voice within half a second.<sup>1</sup> To add, we all have different life experiences and cultural backgrounds that form other perceptions of how a voice sounds. Some studies suggest that higher tone and greater expression through high and low pitch contours are more trustworthy.<sup>2</sup> But, does that hold true if the person engaged with a virtual assistant just had their checking account fraudulently drained and their adrenaline is pumping?

# More than just the right voice

I argue that importance should not be put on the singular act of picking the ‘right’ voice but the many tasks and decisions that go into defining a virtual assistant persona. These decisions will guide a voice talent in how they should speak and steer how a [text-to-speech voice](#) could be sculpted. Without that foundation you’re betting on luck when picking the best voice and have little direction during voice production. While a book could be written about this, here are a handful of foundational principles.

## Foundational principles to creating your brand’s voice

- **Be empathetic to your users.** Brand alignment is important, but an understanding of what your users want to hear is fundamental. The bonus of having this user feedback is that there’s no better direction during a voice-over recording session than setting the stage with a user story. If you can tell a story like the one told here, a voice talent will have a real purpose when delivering lines. That purpose will lead to a delivery that is credible and trustworthy.
- **Be open to change throughout the process.** Allow for tweaks to the persona throughout voice casting and user research. Different use cases come up and adjustments may be needed. Perhaps there’s one voice talent who doesn’t completely align with the persona, but there’s something about them that just works. Or, users are hearing a selected voice as something other than your already defined persona attributes and they provide a different description of voice characteristics. Run with it. A voice persona should be malleable to many situations.
- **Let writing and speaking style influence each other strongly.** They have a symbiotic relationship. If one succeeds, it helps the other succeed. If one fails, the other will struggle. Once you cast a voice or pick a text-to-speech voice you may find that there’s an even better way to handle certain wording based on how the voice sounds. Lastly, if you haven’t been in a voice-over session before, consult with voice actors. They are masters at interpreting written copy and understanding how a character should sound.

Picking the ‘right’ voice for your virtual assistant is a daunting task with opinions galore. Rather than get hung up on that specific point, focus on the elements that influence that choice. Above all else, listen to users to understand their problems, and let that lead to a persona that can be relatable to many users. Then, you’re on a path to having a virtual assistant that is credible and trustworthy – a voice that can put a consumer at ease and increase their loyalty, despite their choice of lunch and panic-inducing problem.

<sup>1</sup> – [https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/archiveofnews/2014/march/headline\\_312691\\_en.html](https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/archiveofnews/2014/march/headline_312691_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> – <https://curiosity.com/topics/what-makes-a-voice-trustworthy-curiosity/>

**Tags:** [Artificial Intelligence](#), [call center](#), [customer retention](#), [customer satisfaction](#), [customer service](#), [financial service industry](#), [first contact resolution](#), [Intelligent self-service](#), [IVR](#), [text-to-speech](#)

## More Information

	<p><b>Try it out!</b></p> <p>Visit our Text-to-Speech playground and hear what a difference the right voice can make.</p> <p><a href="#">Learn more</a></p>
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### About Dan Castellani

Dan Castellani is a conservatory trained musician with a healthy obsession for championing exceptional sounding speech interfaces. In his six years at Nuance, currently as Senior Product Manager of Speech Output Solutions, he has worked with over 100 customers on delivering superior speech output that creates a strong connection with end users.

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