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# Speech TECHNOLOGY

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## Implementation Strategies



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The 2009  
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# Countdown to the DTV Deadline

## Is your call center ready for conversion questions from the disabled?

**W**hat's going to happen on February 18, when the television conversion to digital transmission is complete? Will all go smoothly, like the much-feared Y2K nearly a decade ago, or will TV sets go black, call centers max out capacity, and email requests for tech support knock down servers? As of October, 60 percent of consumers in households in which all TVs will be affected had not taken action to convert their TVs to digital, and nearly half of consumers who requested converter box coupons had not yet purchased a converter box, according to a *Consumer Reports* survey.

Television is a prime source of information and entertainment and, because the disabled are more likely to rely on analog broadcast, people with disabilities may be affected more significantly by the digital transition. To imagine what it's like to join the digital revolution if you have a disability, take every problem you had setting up your converter box or digital TV and "turn up the dial tenfold," says Jennifer Simpson, senior director of telecommunications and technology policy at the American Association of People with Disabilities.

Correctly installing the system may be the biggest barrier to a successful transition. A person with a disability may have limitations when it comes to dexterity (making it more difficult to install a converter box), cognitive function (making it more difficult to maintain the patience required to set up the system), or visual acuity (making it more difficult to program the box). That's why manufacturers and retailers need to ensure adequate channels of customer service are available for these users to obtain assistance.

Specific needs of the disabled include captions for the hearing-impaired and the availability of video description and audio output of emergency information for the vision-impaired. Individuals who have physical disabilities require converter boxes that are easy to connect.

Most digital converter boxes properly pass through captions, and new TVs can display captions, but with menus often buried in multiple levels, problems will arise if consumers can't find the menu to program the options they require. When this occurs and consumers call for support, manufacturers and retailers can take steps to ensure the consumer has a positive, successful experience with customer service.

Call centers at companies like television manufacturer Samsung and retailer Sears rely on interactive voice response (IVR) as the first line of contact consumers

encounter when calling for support. But if the IVR does not accommodate callers with disabilities, the result will be frustrated end users.

Companies likely to receive calls regarding the installation of this new, required technology should ensure that their call centers are equipped to help the disabled, keeping in mind that disabled consumers want to speak with a patient representative who can solve their problems and who will not prematurely disconnect the call.

Companies should consider the following tips to make the call center experience a positive one for their customers with disabilities:

- **Allow callers to zero-out to a representative:** The IVR should mention up front that the caller can press zero to reach an agent.

- **Answer relay calls:** Text relay takes longer to complete because of the nature of the technology, but it is a vital means of communication for people with hearing and speech disabilities.

- **Adequately train staff:** Call center staff must be prepared to take phone calls from the disabled, and should expect that the call will likely be lengthier than one with a non-disabled caller. If a caller has a speech disability, representatives need to be patient. If not, the consumer will have to rely on someone else to make the support call for him, further decreasing his independence. If a representative doesn't understand what the caller said, it's perfectly acceptable to say, "I didn't understand what you said. Can you please say it again more slowly."

- **Ensure availability of redundant communication channels:** Because it is often easier for disabled consumers to communicate via computer, companies should offer live chat and email support. If consumers are required to fill out an email form to obtain support, companies should limit the number of required fields.

Digital television has arrived, along with the capability to integrate myriad speech technology applications. Ensuring that the customer support experience is a positive one for all callers, including those with disabilities, enables consumers to make proper use of the products they purchased and goes a long way to promote goodwill and customer loyalty. ☐

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