

QUICK TAKE



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Kiosks Should Be Seen, Not Heard

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

People can handle rich communication through their sense of hearing. But not with kiosks. The ambient noise in public places, combined with people's limited attention for spoken instructions and dislike of repetitive sounds, makes silence a golden rule for kiosk design.

RESEARCH CATALYST

During evaluations of retail kiosks, we found many kiosks that make inappropriate use of sound.

KIOSKS SHOULD LIMIT THEIR USE OF SOUND

Airports, hotel lobbies, even retail environments are filled with layer upon layer of sound – ambient music, closing doors, walking feet, things dropping, and people chatting. Rising above this din requires a decibel level that will likely draw attention -- usually the last thing that someone standing at a public kiosk wants to do.¹ As a result, kiosk audio should:

- **Use sounds instead of voices.** Providing spoken instructions freezes users in their tracks because they have to focus on the words to get the full message.² Users can interpret simple tones, like the insistent beeping of an ATM waiting for a deposit envelope, more easily. In addition, speech forces users to work at the pace of the recorded message. This effect gets worse when a momentarily distracted user has to wait for the entire message to repeat in order to hear the snippet he missed. But sounds can repeat much more quickly.
- **Alert users to visual information.** Isolated tones can communicate only simple messages. These are usually limited to indicating that the user should take an action or that the action just taken was successful – or not. Visual cues on the machine provide deeper explanation. For example, lights on an ATM's envelope feeder slot explain why the machine is beeping. Similarly, an onscreen confirmation message on a check-in kiosk explains why the machine just happily chirped.
- **Provide feedback to specific actions.** Kiosks that make pointless repetitive noise, like spoken invitations trying to entice passers-by, become sabotage targets for employees. Instead, the kiosk should provide small bursts of audio as the result of individual user actions, making the sounds less frequent and their patterns less monotonous.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Using a kiosk is a bit of an impromptu public performance, which makes people nervous. Calling attention to their actions while at the kiosk heightens users' anxiety. See the June 23, 2004, Best Practices "How Kiosk Software Can Calm Anxious Users."
- ² Psychological experiments dating back to the 1950s demonstrate that attending to a spoken message can consume a person's attention to the point that it brings work on other tasks to a standstill.

