AN IVR SYSTEM (SAMVAD MOBILE VAANI) UNDER PROJECT SAMVAD FOR HARD TO REACH COMMUNITY

Purpose
We wanted to complement community based video dissemination using Pico Projectors with other ICT channels. Our hypothesis was that IVR (Integrated Voice Response) along side human mediated video dissemination could help increasing the knowledge of beneficiaries.

We also hypothesized that IVR could also help disseminate information to those beneficiaries who missed attending face to face video screening for some reasons.

As the penetration of the feature phones in the rural communities is high, IVR could help the project reach out to a wider audience base.

The Process
Partner selection and the platform:
The project partnered with Oniondev Technologies (ODT) as they have a good experience in running IVR services in the rural areas. Their platform allowed a two-way communication which offered advantage over the one way pushing of the calls.

Two-way communication platform allowed the project to not only send the auto-generated calls to the beneficiaries, but also provided an opportunity to the beneficiaries to interact with the system by sending voice message and raise any query that they would like the experts to respond back to.

Targeting the audience
The number of beneficiaries who were targeted to be reached through the channel was estimated in consultation with the state teams and accordingly the IVR platform was setup. For example, UK NHM shared over 30000 mobile numbers of women from Reproductive and Child Health data base. Similarly NHM CG shared over 8000 phone numbers.

Content, design & development:
The content teams from Digital Green and ODT worked together to decided on the final content that would be delivered. It was aligned with themes of the project and specific areas Samvad was focusing on. In addition to this, Digital Green team also worked on deciding some of the priority themes for the program to be targeted through IVR based on the requirements of the partners.

The content was designed to be engaging by including elements of entertainmment. Audio content in drama format was decided to be the best way to engage the audience and it was made sure that the content was short in length.
As mobile phones are often controlled by men, their information needs were also taken care of. The communication package was developed in such a way that it not only addressed them but also those who played a role in care giving such as mother-in-law.

**Setting up the platform:**
The IVR setup was done by Oniondev team. The tasks included estimating the number of telephone lines needed per state to reach the estimated number of beneficiaries with the specified number of messages over a month time. A monthly content calendar was jointly prepared which reflected the schedule of the outbound calls aligned with the video dissemination schedule for the region.

This was done to ensure the complementarity of the channel with the face to face video dissemination. Since at many places pico based face to face dissemination could not be started due to COVID-19 pandemic, it was aligned with the WhatsApp based video dissemination whereever possible.

The system was put in place to ensure that the inbound calls are recorded and are responded back within a week time. The service delivery was planned in such a way that both push (outbound dialing) and pull (inbound dialing) mechanisms were available for the beneficiaries. Inbound dialing allowed the users to access the service at their free will when they had time and were interested in listening to the service.

To make the service free to the users as the cost may be a barrier in accessing the information, it was made to be a missed call service. The system allowed the users to give a missed call and then it generated an outbound call. This ensured that the service is available free of cost to the community.

These calls are scheduled either weekly or fortnightly as per the need of the program in the region and as discussed with the partners. The timing of the call was scheduled in such a way that allows most of the beneficiaries to pick it.

**Dialup database:**
The team continuously updated the database by adding more number of participants to the platform. Database cleanup was another activity that was carried out regularly on the system. To ensure that the calls do not spam the users who are not interested in receiving the calls, a quarterly cleanup of the database was performed. All such listeners who did not hear the content in the previous quarter were removed from the database for the next quarter. All the new and old dialers were automatically included in the service database if they made calls to the system. This ensured that the service was reaching out to users who were really interested in receiving the health advisory and at the same time not spamming the users who were not interested.

**Ground mobilisation:**
The frontline workers were the key community mobilizers for the IVRS service. These FLWs helped create awareness regarding the service. During the face to face dissemination of the community video, the FLWs conducted the service demo of IVRS. The FLWs, also pasted service related posters at strategic locations in the village so that more people could know about the service and try the numbers. FLWs also used the WhatsApp groups that they created to disseminate the community videos to further generate awareness about the service and answer any questions related to the IVRS. For this purpose, digital mobilization materials, like posters, short videos were developed and provided to the FLWs.

**Content plan & delivery:**
The IVR service was designed with different kinds of contents so as to keep it engaging for the listeners. The main themes were designed in drama format which were 3-4 minutes long as this duration was found effective. These themes were in sync with the video dissemination plans.

Content was shuffled on a weekly basis so as to make it relevant to wider audience who were dialing in to access the information. Besides this, other types of content such as interviews with experts, user generated recordings including questions and feedback were interspersed within the main episodes.

Users have the option to skip a content by pressing key 1 on their phones if they do not like it. They also have the option to record a question or share a feedback by pressing key 3 from their phones. A call with the response from the expert was separately generated for the person who recorded their questions.

The portal was also used to run surveys with the target beneficiaries to collect feedback and check their knowledge levels. This was quite useful for designing new content and improve the existing content.

**Challenges**
We did not see much traffic on the inbound calls. Listeners who dialed in to listen, had a higher average call duration but such listeners were few.

**Recommendation:** The program should find the ways to understand the reasons why inbound calls were low and develop mobilisation plan to improve this.

**Recommendation:** An effective mobilisation strategy considering the community and suitability of the channel of communication should be prioritized for improving the engagement of the community with the platform.
Since the outbound calls were made through virtual numbers which kept changing and appeared as spam numbers to the beneficiaries this led to low service pick-up rate.

**Recommendation:** A tech-based solution should be considered to address this challenge. This has the direct bearing on the call pick up rate.

It was realized that the buyin of the government partners was low for IVR because of the various reasons such as existing IVR services and issues around sustainability of the service beyond the project life cycle.

**Recommendation:** More efforts should be placed to influence the key decision makers by sharing the data and evidence and by regular interaction with them to sustain their interest. As an strategy we can promote IVR as a complementary channel to community video approach.

**How can we scale it up:**
IVR is a technology-based solution and hence scaling up the service is relatively simple. It is found to be an effective way of reaching out to the audience at large and impacting behaviour. It is a solution which is quite easy to build, make modifications to run over a large geographical area. With mobile penetration and network availability in rural areas on a all time high, IVR can be used to reach to the last mile conveniently. Going forward it would be important to find solution to some the issues that Samvad experienced including call pick up rate, call duration, in bound call and so forth.

A strong case of complementarity needs to be built with other channels of dissemination especially human mediated video dissemination and shown to the partners. We feel that when an information is repeated using different channels of communication, it may lead to an increase in the knowledge levels of the users and probably adoption as well. Each delivery channel has its own merits and limitations and hence using different communication channels complementing each other perhaps can help improve the access the information.

We require to generate credible evidences and more data on the effectiveness of the channel and also on the cost effectiveness and try to convince the partner to invest in the IVR service.

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The combination of community videos and IVR could help to reach a set of audience which seems difficult by a single channel alone. The community video disseminations mainly targets women audience, messaging through IVR could help reach the men on issues concerning health and nutrition.

Further to this, for scaling up the intervention, few pain points should be addressed programatically and technologically.

- Develop a robust on ground mobilisation plan.
- Provide and use program data to jointly review it with the partners and make course corrections
- Content is the king and hence needs attention and it should be made hyper local and address the immediate needs of the people.
- Carefully design the length of the content to ensure that people listen to the entire episode. Long episodes do not attract listeners.
- Technology related issues such as the IVR number should be such that it looks a call coming from a trusted source to improve the call pick up rates.
- The service features such as free call, missed call, voice recording, asking questions etc should be promoted.