



10 Crucial Questions to Ask

How to Select the Right Closed Captioning Vendor

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Introduction

This white paper provides an intricate approach to selecting a closed captioning vendor that will best fit your needs. There are many captioning companies that offer different capabilities, quality levels, and price points. There are also many reasons to caption, and many benefits to doing so. Whether your purpose is to meet legal requirements, provide more accessible content, boost your SEO, or make your videos searchable, the 10 crucial questions in this white paper will help you compare your options and discern what qualities you should look for in a prospective captioning vendor.

Topics include:

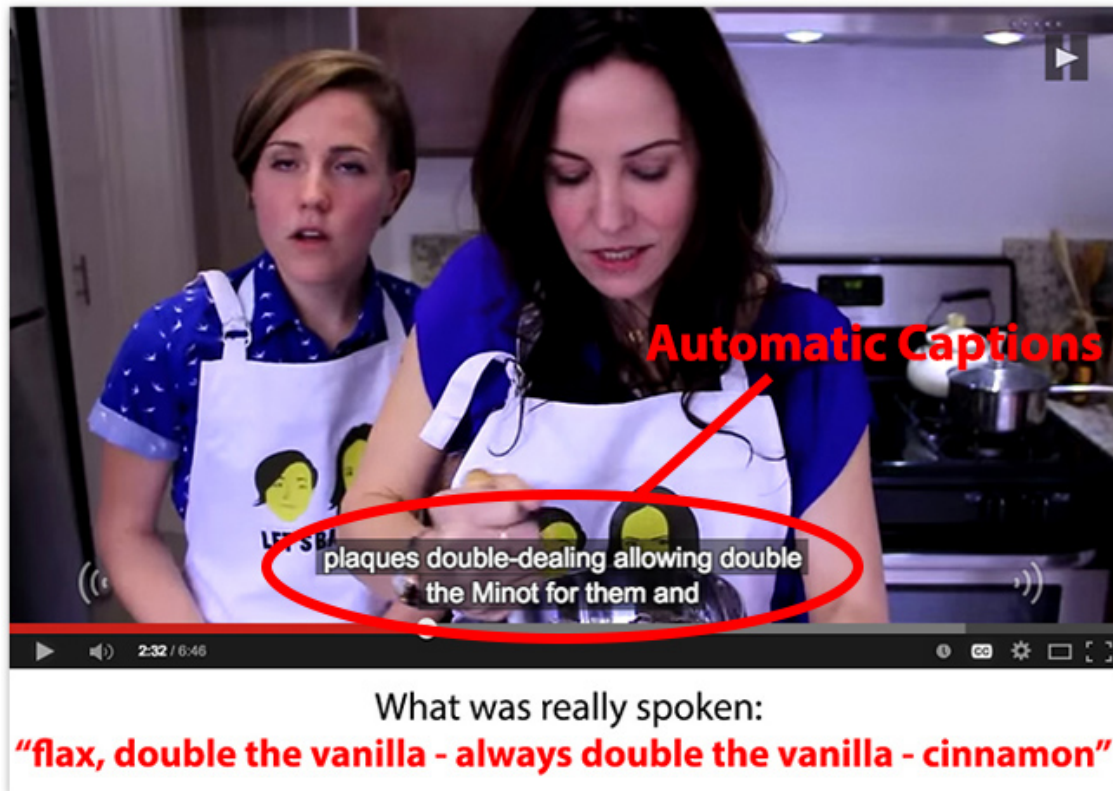
- ▶ Qualities that any good captioning vendor should have;
- ▶ Price points and accuracy rates to look for;
- ▶ Workflow questions to consider;
- ▶ Support for input / output formats;
- ▶ Account system and user management capabilities;
- ▶ Billing questions to ask before you begin;
- ▶ A vendor comparison checklist; and
- ▶ Video search and other tools to keep an eye out for.

Many of the questions within this white paper can be personalized based on your specific requirements and needs. Everyone's criteria are different, and finding a vendor that will make the captioning process work for *you* is key. Hopefully these questions will help you discover what is most important to you, what you can't live without, and what qualities will sell you on a vendor.

1. What is your accuracy rate?

Speech Recognition

Accuracy is often the most pertinent quality to look for when selecting a captioning vendor. A lot of people may be familiar with YouTube's "automatic captions," which use automatic speech recognition alone to create captions for YouTube videos: this is an example of a well-intentioned initiative that has produced some hilariously inaccurate captions. Typically, automatic speech recognition produces about 60-70% accuracy, which means that 1 out of 3 words are wrong - and when speech recognition is wrong, it's usually spectacularly wrong (like in the example below).



When choosing a captioning vendor, it is recommended that the vendor guarantees an accuracy rate of 99% or higher. It is also crucial to garner whether or not the vendor can still guarantee that accuracy level in the case of accents, poor audio quality, background noise, and complex vocabulary, all of which make providing an accurate transcript much harder. Note that an accuracy rate of 99% or higher is critical for creating caption files that will be accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers.

Caption Quality Standards

In addition to accessibility, there are many legal requirements that require a certain level of accuracy: in particular, the FCC recently released new quality standards for closed captioning. Note that the FCC's standards pertain specifically to network and broadcast video (including when placed online). However, because few other quality standards exist for captioning, they can be interpreted for other industries, as well.

Your captioning vendor should comply with the FCC's standards for caption accuracy, synchronicity, program completeness, and caption placement. In terms of accuracy, the FCC states, "Captions must match the spoken words in the dialogue, in their original language (English or Spanish), to the fullest extent possible." Captions should also be provided for nonverbal information, such as sound effects, music playing, and audience reactions, if they are to be considered accurate. The FCC also specifies that captions must convey the tone of the speaker's voice and the intent of the content. The goal here is for captions to maintain the impact of the performance so that the overall message is not lost on the viewer.

How Accuracy Affects SEO

If search or SEO is your main objective, then accuracy is still a critical factor. Transcription errors are not uniformly distributed. The most common errors happen with words that are most vital for search: names of products, people, and places, URLs, formulas, technical vocabulary, and acronyms. What this means is that even a slight reduction in accuracy rate (e.g. 98% instead of 99%) makes the content significantly less viable for search. Keep in mind that using automatic speech recognition alone will likely register with Google as "automatically-generated gibberish" and could seriously harm your SEO efforts. You can see in the chart below how quickly accuracy rates drop as more words are introduced into a sentence.

Word-to-Word Accuracy	1 of x Words Incorrect	8-Word Sentence Accuracy	10-Word Sentence Accuracy
50%	1 of 2	0%	0%
67%	1 of 3	4%	2%
75%	1 of 4	10%	6%
85%	1 of 7	27%	20%
90%	1 of 10	43%	35%
95%	1 of 20	66%	60%
99%	1 of 100	92%	90%

Speaker Identification and Verbatim vs. Clean Read

Another question to ask in regards to accuracy is whether or not the vendor provides options for speaker identification: if not, what is the default? You should also check to see whether the vendor allows you to choose between verbatim and clean read practices for transcription. Most people prefer a "clean read" transcript, where the transcriptionist removes words like "um" or "uh," as well as stutters and unnecessary filler words that take away from the meaning of the sentence. Verbatim transcripts capture every utterance that comes out of the speaker's mouth, including "um," "uh," and stutters. Verbatim transcripts are usually much more frustrating to read and follow than clean read transcripts.

Consistency

Finally, it's important to assess a vendor's ability to maintain accuracy and consistency across many files. When testing out vendors, keep in mind that anyone can produce high accuracy for just a few files. Vendors should be tested with a large quantity of files containing a range of different types of content.



Take away

Your captioning vendor should provide you with near-perfect captions. If accuracy is compromised, your captions could even be detrimental to your accessibility and SEO initiatives.

2. What is the process of creating a transcript?

Another important question to ask, which goes hand in hand with accuracy, is what process the vendor uses for creating transcripts. There are a number of ways to create transcripts and captions, but some lend themselves more to higher quality outputs.

Offshore Transcription

One thing to consider is whether or not the vendor uses offshore transcriptionists. While offshore labor is a lot less expensive, it's also a lot less accurate, as transcriptionists are unlikely to have the same handle on English grammar, spelling, and intent that native speakers have.

Crowdsourcing

Another model related to offshoring that some vendors use is crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing can be risky for a number of reasons, namely because it is highly unlikely that you will receive a consistent level of accuracy. It is also unlikely that the transcriptionists will follow legal accessibility standards.

Training

It is important to take into account whether the vendor's transcriptionists are professionally trained and follow rigorous standards. If not, then there will be major inconsistencies from file to file. If you have technical or academic content, you should check whether the vendor's transcriptionists have domain expertise; this is covered more in the next question.

Multi-Step Process

The most efficient way to produce accurate transcripts involves a multi-step process. Vendors who leverage technology by first putting the video through speech recognition software are usually more cost-effective because the transcriptionists aren't starting from scratch. Using the transcript produced by speech recognition, trained transcriptionists can then go through and edit the transcript, checking for spelling, grammar, intent, and other standards. It is best if there is a third level of review to make sure that the transcript is flawless.



Take away

The best way to guarantee an accurate transcript is to understand your vendor's process. Trained, native English-speaking transcriptionists are most likely to provide you with the intent and accuracy that you require.

3. How do you handle difficult content?

If you produce videos with complex subject matters, it is crucial to find a captioning vendor that can still output captions at a high level of accuracy. A lot of colleges and universities find that some captioning vendors do not produce accurate captions for more advanced subjects, such as physics, calculus,

philosophy, law, and medicine. Anyone with videos that cover esoteric concepts or use difficult language must find a captioning vendor that can handle such content.

If the transcriptionists don't understand your content, they are less likely to provide captions that fully grasp the intent of your video. Spelling might be incorrect for difficult terms, and the accuracy will be significantly reduced.

So how do the best captioning vendors handle difficult content? There are a few ways to still provide near-perfect captions even for the most complex subjects.

Glossaries



First, check to see if your captioning vendor offers the ability to upload a glossary or cheat-sheet with correct spellings for difficult words and subject-specific terms. This will help your transcriptionist accurately caption your content. The ability to upload glossaries is also a good weathervane for telling whether your vendor understands the realities of the captioning process, and how much they truly care about accuracy.

Domain Expertise

Second, see how your captioning vendor selects transcriptionists. The best scenario is that the vendor draws transcriptionists with expertise in many different domains, such as mathematics, religion, software technology, medicine, and finances. Assigning difficult content to transcriptionists who are most familiar with the subject invariably produces the best results.

Editing Transcripts



In case there are still errors in your transcripts (after all, a guarantee of 99% accuracy still isn't entirely flawless), you should check to see what the editing process is like through your vendor. Do they provide an editing interface where you can make changes yourself? Once edits are made, will they propagate to all output files without needing to reprocess?



Take away

The more complex your content is, the more important it is for you to grill your captioning vendor about how they handle difficult content. If they do not have systems in place to ensure accuracy for your subject matter, you can cross them off the list immediately.

4. What is your turnaround?

Same Day

This is a critical question to pose to captioning vendors. Most captioning vendors provide a few different turnaround options: usually there is a "standard" turnaround option, as well as faster turnaround options at increased price points. The best captioning vendors provide a same day turnaround option to handle urgent projects.

Selecting Turnaround

It is important to ask if the vendor lets you select turnaround for each file, or for each project. This provides operational flexibility and budgetary control. Usually with the fastest turnaround options, there are stipulations on how much content the vendor can guarantee within that timeframe, so that is important to keep in mind, too. Along these lines, make sure that the process of specifying turnaround will be a practical addition to your workflow: for instance, rather than sending an email to the vendor to specify turnaround, it is often more seamless if turnaround selection is tied into the uploading process so that you are in complete control.

Extended Turnaround

It is also worth asking whether the vendor offers any extended turnaround options at a lower price point. If you do not have urgent deadlines for your captioning projects, this can be a great way to reduce cost at the same high level of accuracy. Lastly, keep in mind that captioning companies are notorious for missing deadlines, so be sure to ask about their track record and policies for remedying late files.



Take away

Deadlines are important. You need to make sure that the vendor provides flexible turnaround options and that they have a high success rate of meeting deadlines (even for fast turnaround).

5. What video formats do you accept, and what caption formats do you provide?

Obviously, being able to input your video files and output your caption files in the formats you require are necessary capabilities of the captioning vendor.

Formats

First, check what type of video file format you will be using. Your prospective vendors will easily be able to tell you whether or not they take that file format; good captioning vendors can support most formats and codecs.

Next, think about where you will be publishing your video. Is it for YouTube, broadcast, DVD, iTunes? Make sure that the captioning vendor can output your closed captions in the format you require. There are many resources that can help you determine what format you need if you aren't sure. It is a good bet that if a captioning vendor provides captions in more than 50 formats, they will be able to output just about any format you could need.



Caption Output



Another question to ask is, does the vendor allow you to download your captions in multiple formats, and will you have access to the captions over time? Also, if you have a proprietary system, can the vendor produce a custom output format just for you?

Import for Existing Captions

Lastly, it's worth asking if the vendor allows you to import and reformat your existing transcripts or captions. This is very helpful if you have a lot of content being distributed to different end points.



Take away

This is a simple way to rule out vendors. If the vendor cannot accept your video file format or cannot output the caption file format(s) you need, you should immediately cross them off your list.

6. Do you provide integrations to automate the workflow?

If you use one of the major video platforms, like YouTube, or a lecture capture system, it is worth considering a captioning vendor with an integration. Integrations go beyond platform compatibility, and should allow you to skip many steps in the upload process. Oftentimes, integrations even automate the captioning workflow to make the process as seamless as possible.



Integrations usually allow users to link their video platform account with their captioning account. Once you have selected your videos for captioning (either directly from your captioning account or from your video platform account, depending on the integration and the vendor), the captions will automatically post back to your videos.

Make sure you ask your prospective captioning vendors what platforms they integrate with, and whether the workflow is automated.



Take away

Integrations make the captioning workflow seamless and automatic. If you find a vendor that integrates with your video platform or lecture capture system, they should be a strong contender.

7. What does the workflow look like?

It's a good idea to have your prospective captioning vendors walk you through the captioning workflow, as it is critical that it will integrate well with your current production workflow.

If the vendor provides integrations, as discussed in question 6, it will minimize your captioning workflow. However, integrations are not available for all video platforms, and many people host videos on their own servers. In the case that there is no integration available, the captioning workflow is an essential consideration when shopping for a vendor.

Important Considerations

When looking at the captioning workflow, the following are major questions to consider:

- ▶ What are the upload options? Do you have to upload to an account system, or are there FTP and API upload options? Is it possible to upload by providing links?
- ▶ How do you specify things like turnaround, glossaries, speaker identification, transcription settings, and download preferences?
- ▶ Once the captions are completed, how are you informed that they are ready?
- ▶ How do you download your caption files? Can you select multiple formats and multiple files at once for bulk download?
- ▶ If there are errors in your transcript, is it easy to edit them? Can you do it yourself, or do you have to go through the vendor?
- ▶ Once you have downloaded your captions, will they be gone forever? Or are they stored so that you can easily go back and download other formats in the future?
- ▶ If you switch video platforms, will the captioning vendor provide the ability to port captions over to your new platform?



Take away

Make sure that the workflow will work for you. The vendor should make the captioning process as easy as possible; if it sounds stressful, it's not the right fit.

8. What is the cost of captioning?

This question is probably at the top of your list. Really, this question is made up of a series of questions, since cost can vary based on turnaround, order size, and other fees. You should begin by asking how the pricing model works, as this will be the basis for all of your other questions.

Pricing Model

Pricing is usually based on duration of the recorded content – usually per minute or per hour. However, you should ask vendors about rounding. Many captioning vendors round up to the nearest minute or 5-minute increment. The most cost-effective approach is not to round at all. This can add up to significant savings, especially if you have a lot of short files. You should also ask vendors if there is a per-file minimum.



Other Fees

Next, ask if there are any extra fees that aren't explained in the pricing model. Some captioning vendors have a base price, but then they have a long list of extra fees for multiple speakers, speaker identification, certain caption formats, etc. Make sure you understand the total price, so there are no surprises.

Another thing to consider is whether or not the vendor requires a set up or platform fee. This can be an added cost that sometimes does not make sense for people looking into captioning solutions. You should also ask whether the vendor requires a minimum to begin captioning. If you only have sporadic captioning needs, you want to make sure that you will be able to caption your videos despite not having a lot of content.

Bulk Discounts

Once you know how the pricing model works, the next question is whether the vendor provides bulk discounts. In some cases, vendors will let you pre-purchase a bulk number of hours, providing you with sometimes significant discounts; whenever you upload content, it will pull from that bulk purchase. This is a great way to make captioning more cost-effective.

Cost vs. Accuracy

The cost of captioning is usually in a delicate balance with accuracy. This is important to keep in mind, as you might want to be wary of the cheapest captioning vendors. A lot of times, the cheapest options sacrifice accuracy by crowdsourcing or using offshore transcriptionists. However, you should also be wary of the more expensive vendors, as usually their captioning process is more expensive than it needs to be because they don't make use of modern technology.



If you do elect to go with a lower cost provider, consider that the cost of cleaning up those captions – if quality is important to you – can be more significant than anticipated. Make sure that you consider all of the costs related to the process of creating an accurate transcript.



Take away

Make sure that the cost of captioning is reasonable. You don't want to sacrifice accuracy for a low price, but you also want to make sure the vendor is cost-effective and takes advantage of modern technology. Consider how bulk discounts could make captioning a more affordable endeavor.

9. What are the capabilities of the account system?

Account Settings

Making sure that the account system and user management will work for you and your team is another vital consideration for prospective vendors. A lot of people require that the account system allow for multiple users with different user permissions – some with billing access, some with the ability to add and manage other users, etc. Does the vendor support the settings you require?



Sub Accounts

Along those lines, does the vendor allow for sub accounts? For example, a university might have a blanket account, but they may require each department that is using the captioning service to have its own sub account. Similarly, does the vendor allow for billing across departments or sub accounts? A lot of times, departments have separate budgets, and it is much easier if they can pay separately.

Billing

Billing is often something that is overlooked in the vendor selection process, but it is critical to a successful relationship with your captioning service. How does invoicing work? Is all billing done electronically? Can you pay directly from within your account? Is everything itemized? These are all questions to ask before you get started.



Is

User Interface

Once you have the billing and user management side of the account system sorted out, you should also discern how user-friendly the account system is. Is it easy to navigate? Is it clear where to upload and download your captions? Are your files organized in an accessible way? How long are caption and transcript files stored in the account, and is it possible to download different formats at a later time? Can you easily set transcription, download, billing, and user settings? Does the vendor have tutorials and good documentation on how to use the account system? After all, if you can't easily navigate the account, you can't get anything done.



Take away

Making sure that the account system, billing, and user management are clearly defined and easy to navigate can make or break your captioning experience. Make sure that you will be able to set user permissions and account settings in the way you require before getting started.

10. Will I get reliable support?

Like any service, captioning can be challenging at times. In case you have trouble at any point along the way, it is important to know that there will be people there to help answer your questions and to get you on the right path. Does the vendor offer good customer support?



Assuming the vendor provides support, how is it made available? Can you call? E-mail? How fast is the response time? Is there extensive support documentation available? These are all important questions that will help you gauge the depth of support available. Finding a vendor that considers good customer support to be part of their mission will ease your mind and save you lots of frustration down the road.



Take away

You don't want to wait until you have a problem to learn that the vendor's customer support is sub-par. Make sure that they will be able and happy to help you right off the bat.

Other Considerations

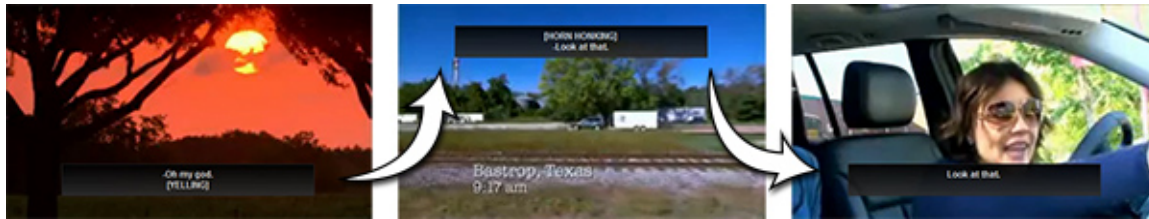
Captioning is a great basis for a lot of useful features, depending on your vendor's offerings. It is worth seeing what else your prospective vendors can offer in addition to captioning. Does the vendor offer any special plugins or tools that you might not know about?

Translation and Subtitles

For starters, transcripts provide an obvious foundation for translation. Once you have an English transcript or caption file, it is easy to translate that into different languages to provide multilingual subtitles for your video. Check with your prospective vendors to see if they provide translation and subtitling options.

Caption Placement

The FCC quality standards require that captions do not obscure any important on-screen text or other visual information. For example, if your video contains an interview segment where the speaker's name or other information is written at the bottom of the screen, the captions should be moved elsewhere – usually up – on the screen. Does the vendor have a way to detect on-screen text and change the caption placement accordingly?



Open Captions and Caption Encoding

Another thing to check for is whether the vendors offer caption encoding. In most cases, captions are output as a separate "side car" file and are uploaded to the video player. However, in certain instances, the only way for captions to play is to actually embed them in the video. The most common use case for caption encoding is so that captions can be seen on iPhones, which use a QuickTime player that doesn't support captions any other way. If you foresee needing caption encoding, make sure the vendor can do this for you.

Caption and Subtitle Editing

As mentioned before, another feature that can be incredibly useful is an editing interface that will allow you to edit small errors or inaudible words within your caption file without having to go through the vendor. This can save a lot of time and stress, especially if the edits will propagate without having to reprocess any files. Ask your prospective vendors what the process is if there are any edits you need to make. Also, if you're using a video platform like YouTube, do your edits automatically update the captions on the video platform?

Caption Import and Transcript Alignment

Does the vendor allow you to import and reformat your existing captions or subtitles? This is very helpful if you have a lot of content being distributed to different end points. Also, does the vendor allow you to sync an existing transcript with a video in order to create captions?

Ability to Caption 3rd Party YouTube Videos

A final question to consider is whether or not the vendor provides ways of captioning videos that you do not own. Particularly within education, a lot of professors will use videos that they don't own in their classes. However, a lot of times, educational institutions are required to caption all video content for students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Does the vendor offer a captions plugin that you can use for videos you don't own? Keep in mind that it is always important to consider copyright law; however, education is usually considered a fair use case in terms of captioning.

Video Search Tools

Jeroen Wijering, founder of JW player, gave a keynote address in which he discussed interactive transcripts as one of the top 3 new innovations in online video technology. Interactive transcripts are time-synchronized transcripts that allow viewers to jump to any point in the video by clicking on a word in the transcript. They also allow users to search within the text of the transcript to find the most relevant content, and then jump directly to that point in the video. By exposing all of the content within a video, interactive transcripts make search much more productive and improve your viewers' experience.

If you want the benefits of video search, ask your prospective vendors if they offer these tools. You should also ask whether their tools are included in the price of captioning, or whether there is an additional cost.

The image shows a video player interface with a search bar and transcript overlay. The video player on the left shows a man speaking, with a search bar and transcript overlay. The transcript on the right shows search results for 'linguistics' with a highlighted snippet.



Take away

There are a lot of great features and tools that can arise from captioning. Check to see whether the vendor offers any additional services, as they can add a lot of value to your captioning initiative. Interactive transcripts can vastly improve a viewer's experience by making videos searchable. If your prospective vendor provides these tools, particularly at no additional cost, it could be a factor that tips the scales in their favor.

Conclusion

Selecting a captioning vendor is a task that requires a lot of thought and research. The goal of this white paper is to help you discern what qualities are most important to you in a captioning service, as well as to help you figure out whether or not your prospective captioning vendors will be able to provide you with the capabilities you require.

Below, you will find a checklist to complete for each captioning vendor you are considering. The checklist is a compilation of the questions we have gone over in this white paper: ideally, your vendor will be able to check all of the boxes. Hopefully, this checklist will allow you to easily compare and contrast the vendors you are looking at and come to a clear conclusion about the best captioning solution for you.

Best of luck in your search!

✓	REQUIREMENT	CATEGORY
	Vendor provides accurate captions	Accuracy
	Vendor does not crowdsource or use offshore transcriptionists	Accuracy
	Transcriptionists go through training on standards	Accuracy
	Vendor is able to handle difficult content & accents	Accuracy
	Vendor provides an easy way to edit captions without reprocessing	Accuracy
	Vendor will be able to meet my required deadlines	Turnaround
	Vendor provides flexible turnaround options	Turnaround
	Vendor can input and output the formats I require	Formats
	Captions can be downloaded at any time in any format	Formats
	Vendor is integrated with my video platform	Integrations
	The captioning workflow is compatible with my needs	Workflow
	Captioning is cost-effective for the level of accuracy	Price
	Account system supports multiple users & permissioning	Account
	Billing is available across different departments	Account
	Invoices and billing are simple and itemized	Account
	Customer support is dependable	Support
	Vendor can create captions from existing transcripts & can import existing captions	Other Features
	Captions can be translated into multilingual subtitles	Other Features
	Vendor provides a way to caption videos I don't own	Other Features
	Vendor has tools to make my videos searchable & interactive	Other Features
	Vendor provides caption placement (FCC requirement)	Other Features

About 3Play Media

3Play Media provides cost-effective, premium quality captioning, transcription, and subtitling solutions to hundreds of customers in higher education, enterprise, entertainment, media, and government. Our mission is to simplify the process by providing a user-friendly account system, flexible API's, and integrations with a multitude of video players, platforms, and lecture capture systems. 3Play Media is based in Boston, MA and has been operating since 2007.

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