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Back to Basics: A Google Voice Tutorial

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Earlier, I've written about various miracles of modern technology that can enhance your ability to communicate and receive information, including [newsreaders](#) (for keeping up with blogs and other RSS feeds), [Twitter](#) (which in my opinion has quickly degenerated from a decent information-sharing service to a celebrity and commercial-filled waste of time) and a slew of [useful BlackBerry applications](#).

This column goes back to basics with a focus on voice -- the fundamental information-delivery system -- specifically, a relatively new service called [Google Voice](#).

The basic problem Google Voice attempts to address with its free service is the fact that most of us can be reached by phone in several different ways: at the office, on mobile and at home. Calls placed to one of these places may not reach us, and voice mail messages left in one box may not be retrieved in a timely fashion.

Google Voice solves this problem by, oddly enough, adding yet another number, the Google Voice number, that acts as sort of an automated switchboard, redirecting all incoming calls. When you sign up for Google Voice you select a new phone number from the million or so numbers in a wide variety of area codes secured by Google. Then, a call placed to your Google Voice number will be forwarded to and will ring on whichever phone number or numbers you direct it to. If you don't pick up, the caller can leave a message that is transcribed and delivered to your e-mail inbox (with the voice recording attached).

Google has added a number of enhancements since it purchased the service (formerly known as [GrandCentral](#)) in 2007 that take it well beyond the basics and adds significant value to it -- all of which is currently free. While this column may read like a puff piece for Google Voice, it is a remarkable service that provides genuine value and is worth considering.

NUMBER PORTABILITY

The main problem many may have with the service arises from the need to inform all of your contacts about your new Google Voice number. For most, it would be far better if one of our existing numbers could be made to operate on the Google Voice platform.

While Google Voice's "FAQ" states that "number portability" is not presently supported, at least one prominent technology journalist (Michael Arrington of TechCrunch) has convinced Google to allow him to move his mobile number to the service.

Because the process he describes is essentially the same as switching from your present mobile carrier to a new carrier, assuming that Google opens this feature up to others, those making this switch may incur early termination fees from their existing mobile carriers. (Those who switch will also need a new mobile number, since their service under the old number will have terminated. Because you can add as many forwarding numbers to Google Voice as you want, that new mobile number becomes irrelevant.)

The ability to make your existing mobile number your Google Voice number will significantly reduce the problem of having to inform your entire contact list about your Google Voice number, since all calls placed to your mobile number will now be managed by Google Voice.

CALL FORWARDING FLEXIBILITY

Google Voice allows you to set where and when to forward which calls. For example, you can set the service so that it does not forward calls to your home number on weekdays between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m.. You can also group your contacts by family, friends, clients, co-workers, etc., to create a different forwarding setting applicable to each group. You might forward calls from contacts in the "co-workers" group only to your work and mobile phones during weekday work hours, while forwarding calls from your "friends" group to all of your listed phones all the time.

You can also easily edit your forwarding list to add or delete numbers. If you're traveling for an extended period and for some reason want to be reachable at your local counsel's office or holiday villa, you can simply add the appropriate number to your forwarding list and direct calls to those numbers as well. One current limitation: Google Voice does not forward calls to international numbers.

TRANSCRIPTION AND DELIVERY

Despite Google Voice's best efforts to make you reachable by phone wherever and whenever you may be, there may be times when you just can't pick up the phone. Google Voice will record the caller's message, transcribe it and forward it to you via text message or e-mail, in addition to holding it in your Google Voice inbox accessible via the Internet.

Given the current limitations of voice recognition technology, the quality of the transcripts I have received is spotty at best. But in most cases there is more than enough information to let you know what the message is about, and the audio recording is forwarded with the transcription as well. The transcripts and voice recordings can then be treated much in the same way as e-mail, so you can forward your messages as needed, a feature that is particularly useful when traveling and you want a colleague to act on a message in your absence.

A "Do Not Disturb" feature allows you to send all calls directly to voice mail. You can also access your messages by calling your Google Voice number and listening your voice mail,

just as you do with mobile or office phones.

CALL RECORDING

One feature attorneys may find particularly useful is the ability to record incoming phone calls. Any incoming call can be recorded by pressing a single button, which also stops the recording (outgoing calls cannot presently be recorded). While one's thoughts may leap to the various nefarious purposes to which this feature could be directed, Google notes that "we provide an automated verbal announcement when call recording has been initiated and when it has been stopped."

Even though this may take some of the fun out of the feature, call recording remains a very useful tool for making a (consensual) record of witness interviews or discussions with experts that take place over the phone.

CALL MONITORING AND BLOCKING

While some answering machines still allow us to indulge in the guilty pleasure of screening calls, mobile and office phones typically don't. Well, with Google Voice it's back. Here's how it works.

First, you set the service so that callers must announce themselves (you can select which groups of contacts this rule applies to, so that those in the "family" group need not announce who they are when they call). When someone calls, Google Voice will ring you, announce who the caller is, then give you the option to take the call or not. If you choose not to, the caller can leave a message, and by hitting a button on your keypad you can listen in. If you decide to take the call, you can break in during the message by hitting another key.

Tired of fielding calls from pesky headhunters, ex-significant others, trolling investment advisers or the occasional wandering charity? Block them! Google Voice allows you to designate phone numbers that, instead of making it through to your voice mail, are connected to a recording that informs them your number is "not in service." While not a feature most will use frequently, it's nice to know it's there if needed.

SIGNING UP

If you've read this far, you may be disappointed to learn that Google Voice is presently available by invitation, a situation that is likely to change in the near future. In the meantime, request an invitation at <https://services.google.com/fb/forms/googlevoiceinvite/>.

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