

# Let freedom ring with Google Voice

August 5 2009, By Etan Horowitz

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Google logo

With the exception of touch-tone phones, Caller ID and cell phones, talking on the phone hasn't changed a lot during the past few decades. That's a big reason why people are increasingly choosing to text, e-mail and send instant messages instead of making a call.

The much-anticipated, free Google Voice service aims to change all that. Formerly known as "GrandCentral," Google Voice was relaunched earlier this year and is available by invitation only. To request an invitation, go to [Google.com/voice](http://Google.com/voice).

Google Voice will definitely change the way you handle phone calls, but there are some hurdles that may prevent people from diving in.

To use the service you choose a new phone number, which you then set up to ring simultaneously as many phones as you like, regardless if it's a cell, landline or Internet phone. With a Google Voice number, your

friends and family members won't have to call multiple numbers to get hold of you. But that's only the beginning.

One of the best things about Google Voice are the many features that let you erect a virtual wall around yourself so you only talk to the people you really want to hear from.

When someone not in your address book calls you for the first time, they will be asked to state their name, which you will hear when you answer. Whenever you pick up a Google Voice call, you are given three options: press 1 to answer the call, press 2 to send the call to voicemail or press 3 to listen in on the voicemail.

That's right, you can actually screen your calls and break into the message to talk to the caller. You can create detailed rules and settings for certain phone numbers or groups of people. For example, when your kids call, you can choose which phones ring and set a special voicemail that only they will hear. When your annoying friend calls, you can have their calls automatically go to voicemail. You can also set schedules for which phones you want to ring at different times of the day.

Then there's the nuclear option. If you never want to hear from someone, you can "block" their number so when they call, they will hear a recording telling them that your number is not in service. For telemarketers, you can mark their number as "spam," so your phones won't ring in the future and their voicemails will be marked as spam.

The service came in handy for me when I placed an ad for Orlando Magic tickets on Craigslist because it let me decide who to speak with or call back.

Google Voice lets you manage everything online in a similar manner to how Outlook or Gmail lets you manage your e-mail. So there's a record

of every text message, missed call, voicemail or placed call. You can even record calls by pressing 4 (the other person is notified and recordings are stored online).

Voicemails are automatically transcribed as text, which is a big help when someone leaves a phone number or address on your voicemail. But it's far from perfect.

One of my favorite features is the ability to switch a call from one phone to the next without having to hang up. So there's no need to tell someone "let me call you back on my landline" when you walk into somewhere with spotty coverage. You can also make cheap international calls from your phone by dialing your Google Voice number to place the call.

By far, the biggest hurdle is that you have to pick a new number and try to convince/persuade your contacts to start using it. Craig Walker, product manager for Google Voice, said the company hopes to add number portability in the future.

Another hurdle is making sure your Google Voice number shows up in the Caller ID when you call from a connected phone. If you have a BlackBerry or T-Mobile G1, there are free Google Voice mobile apps you can download so your number shows up on Caller ID when you initiate a call from inside the app. On another phone, you can call your [Google](#) Voice number first and then enter the number you want to call so the number will show up.

Despite the drawbacks, [Google Voice](#) is worth it for most people, especially the self-employed, business travelers and students.

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Citation: Let freedom ring with Google Voice (2009, August 5) retrieved 4 April 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2009-08-freedom-google-voice.html>

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