

Review: Google Voice has cool tricks but downsides

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In this screen shot provided by Google, a Google Voice inbox is shown. (AP Photo/Google)

(AP) -- Google Inc. gives away a lot of good stuff for free. That struck me last year when I downloaded the free Google Maps app to my "smart" phone. It turned the phone into a handy navigation system and killed my desire to buy a \$100 standalone GPS unit.

So I was intrigued to try [Google](#) Voice. That is a service that gives you one phone number that connects to all of your phones. It also manages your voice and text messages and gives you a way to make cheap or free international calls. It comes as a downloadable application for cell phones and as a Web-based program.

The program has the potential to upend the business of phone calls - or at least you might get that impression from the hubbub surrounding it.

Apple Inc. has held up approving Google Voice for use on the [iPhone](#), and the Federal Communications Commission jumped in to ask why.

But I don't get the hype. Google Voice hasn't changed my world.

I used the free Web-based system, although the app is available on [BlackBerry](#) phones and devices that use Google's Android operating system. Because of the hefty cost of rolling the service out, for now it's available on an invitation-only, first-come, first-served basis. I asked to be included last month the same way as anyone else and got an invite a few days later.

I picked a new Google Voice phone number, linked it to my mobile phone, and was off to the races. For now, you can't use your existing phone number as the one you manage through Google Voice, although allowing such "number portability" is something the company is considering.

Google Voice offers discounted phone calls much like inexpensive phone cards that require you to call a toll-free number and enter codes before you dial someone. The advantage of Google Voice is that you can skip the extra steps of dialing a 1-800 number and a code from the phone card.

After firing up my phone's Web browser and going to the Google Voice page, I can enter a number and hit call, or pick someone off my contacts list. Google Voice first calls my phone, then the receiving party's. For those with the Google Voice downloadable app, the phone just calls the party after rerouting through an intermediary link. This allows the recipient to see your Google Voice number appear on his caller ID.

The sound quality was fine but I noticed a delay. Sometimes my regular cell phone calls have this too, so that might not be anything to blame on

Google Voice.

Here's the catch, though. I'm still using up my regular cell phone minutes. I have a ton, so there's no added expense. But it makes the service feel like less of a breakthrough.

On international calls, Google charges rates that are competitive with Skype, which routes calls over the Internet, and with phone cards - all of which are way cheaper than just dialing abroad straight from my cell phone. Google even gives new members a 10-cent credit to begin. (You refill your account by paying with a credit card online.)

Google isn't necessarily the cheapest option, though. If you want to call Afghanistan, for example, you're better off using the 2 NayPinoy phone card from PhoneCardSmile.com, which charges 26.3 cents per minute. Google would charge you 29 cents, and Skype 35.5 cents. But only Google and the phone card work for my mobile phone. Skype requires an app that's not compatible with my phone, which runs the Windows Mobile operating system.

Google Voice isn't the first to offer this sort of savings on international calling. Services from Rebtel and Jajah do pretty much the same thing, and have the added advantage of working from phones that aren't Internet-enabled. But Google offers some bells and whistles that make its system somewhat more compelling.

For instance, I can screen the people who call my Google Voice number. If it's someone who isn't in my contact list, he gets asked his name, which is played to me at the top of the call, after which I can send him to voice mail.

Voice mail is automatically transcribed and sent to me by e-mail and [text message](#). The result is good enough to get the gist and the caller's name

and number, despite a few garbles. One annoyance is that if the message is fairly long, the top is chopped into three parts and sent via separate texts, using up the message quota on my wireless plan - although you can turn off forwarding of the transcripts.

Voice mail playback can be clunky. On my Windows Mobile phone, I have to save an audio file to memory, and use Windows Media player to play it back. It comes out of the speaker on the back of my phone instead of the earpiece, crimping my privacy. If you use the app, you can choose whether to play voice mail from either the earpiece or speaker.

On a PC, voice mail plays fine inside the Google Voice page, even highlighting the transcribed words as they are spoken, sort of like a karaoke machine.

Text messaging, even internationally, is free, which I found surprising and useful. Even though I have to fire up the browser and text through it, it saves me about 50 cents each time. Replies are forwarded to my phone's regular messaging system, chopped up if they are too long. Or they appear in full in a Web browser, either on the phone or a PC.

Fortunately for me, Google Voice offers free calls to my native Canada (compared to 2.1 cents a minute on Skype and a penny on some phone cards).

But the downside to [Google Voice](#) is that it requires too many keystrokes to become part of my everyday phone use. Although this certainly could take a bite out of phone companies' revenue, I'm not sure why Apple fears it on the iPhone. Google may be trying to take over the world, but it hasn't yet taken over my phone.

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