

Mobile phone users enlisting YouMail 'digital secretary'

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File photo of a man playing the video game Yakuza by Sega while talking on his cell phone in Los Angeles. California startup YouMail said Monday that it has passed the half-billion-call mark and now manages more than 1.5 million calls daily.

Ranks of mobile phone users are enlisting the services of a "digital secretary" that automatically snubs unwanted callers, transcribes messages, and gives loved ones special handling.

California startup YouMail said Monday that it has passed the half-billion-call mark and now manages more than 1.5 million calls daily.

"The growth is strong and steady," YouMail founder and chief executive Alex Quilici told AFP. "It is almost more convenient to not answer the phone with YouMail."

YouMail lets users personalize greetings to specific incoming telephone numbers. A spouse whose call is missed might be greeted with recorded words of affection while a boss could be reassured a project is nearly complete.

A "DitchMail" feature lets users bash telemarketers, troublesome ex-paramours, or other unwanted callers in recorded greetings and then have the calls automatically disconnect.

YouMail users have an online community that shares digital recordings of greetings tailored for various occasions.

Snippets lifted from movies or television shows along with music or official-sounding advisories were among the array of downloadable greetings available at greetings.youmail.com on Monday.

"The fingers you have used to dial are too fat, to obtain a special dialing wand please mash the keypad with your palm now," said a greeting taken from a popular animated comedy television show "The Simpsons."

Another greeting featured a woman calmly advising callers they had reached the devil's answering service then telling which buttons to hit to sell one's soul, get directions to hell, or speak with a demon.

"When we started YouMail there were no solutions for [voice mail](#) that were fun to use," Quilici said.

"We thought we could do a better job by letting people leave personal greetings tailored to each caller."

DitchMail was the Southern California company's first offering, mobile phone greetings for people users didn't want to hear from, according to the founder.

The list of DitchMail options included recordings titled "Die in a fire" and "Lying, cheating, bastard" along with an "ear-splitting whistle" and an authentic sounding "this number is no longer in service."

Telemarketers that use blocked or private numbers aren't necessarily protected from YouMail users' scorn.

Telemarketers phone numbers are shared in the YouMail online community, and the service lets users automatically notify callers that messages from blocked numbers will not be accepted.

YouMail has expanded beyond Ditchmail to add categories for holiday, celebrity, political, inspirational, sports, polite, and foreign language greetings.

About two years ago, YouMail added machine-based conversion of voice messages to text but found "it sometimes worked wonderfully and sometimes it was completely misleading or gibberish," Quilici said.

"A phone in a crowded bar is a recipe for disaster; you get the dog died instead of the dog tried," Quilici said of relying purely on machines to transcribe voice messages.

YouMail added humans into the equation, having people edit and refine messages transcribed to text.

"We thought we could organize messages visually on computers, smartphones, iPads, iPods...true multi-platform visual voice mail," Quilici said.

"Our goal is to provide it on every device."

YouMail saw a boost after Google launched its Voice service that lets people have one number that rings at all of their telephones; converts voice mail or text messages into email, and allows for toll-free calls to the United States and Canada, according to Quilici.

Last month, Google added Voice to its free Web-based email service Gmail and logged more than a million calls in the 24 hours after its launch.

"A category is being created of better voice mail," Quilici said.

"You will see more carriers offering us as an option."

Basic YouMail is free, but transcriptions are a premium service with a typical monthly plan costing seven dollars and transcribing a maximum of 50 messages from voice to text.

Unlimited message transcription can be had for 30 dollars a month.

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