

Google prepping its Duplex bot for a summer rollout

June 27 2018, by Ryan Nakashima



In this Tuesday, June 26, 2018, photo Nick Fox, VP of Assistant and Search for Google, talks about the Duplex program, which allows the user to book an appointment over the phone, at Oren's Hummus Shop in Mountain View, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

When Google first introduced its phone-calling digital concierge Duplex in May, some thought it sounded too human. Others worried that it would secretly record calls with people.

The search giant says it has been working to address these concerns.

For starters, Google says that the bot will identify itself as an automated assistant upfront and will disclose that it's recording calls. Human operators will be standing by as backup should a call go off the rails.

As for Duplex's tendency to use speech fillers like "ums" and "ahs," Google notes that this technique improved the assistant's ability to book appointments by interacting more naturally with humans on the other end of the line.

The search giant provided these and other details in a demonstration for reporters Tuesday ahead of the system's gradual rollout this summer.

The company is taking great pains to assure that Duplex conforms to a set of principles around artificial intelligence it released earlier this month. Among them: only develop tools that are socially beneficial and that incorporate privacy by design.

"We're not trying to trick people," Scott Huffman, Google's vice president of engineering for the Google Assistant, told reporters. To demonstrate the point, he played a recording of an early Duplex prototype in which a computerized, British-accented male voice tried to book a restaurant reservation for four, and filled an awkward silence with an off-kilter "Hello."



In this Tuesday, June 26, 2018, photo Scott Huffman, VP for Engineering for Google, talks about the Duplex program, which allows the user to book an appointment over the phone, at Oren's Hummus Shop in Mountain View, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

"The system didn't sound very good," Huffman said. "People would hang up on it. They got uncomfortable with the conversation. The team began to iterate on, 'How do we make it sound more natural?' As they did that, with every step, we found that our success rate went up."

Now, Duplex can successfully book hair appointments, make restaurant reservations or check holiday business hours—the only tasks it is programmed to complete—four out of five times without intervention by humans.

And it identifies itself in a few different ways. In one sample call,

Duplex began, "Hi, I'm calling to make a reservation. I'm Google's automated booking service, so I'll record the call." In another, it starts, "Hi I'm the Google Assistant, calling to make a reservation for a client. This automated call will be recorded."

Businesses can opt out of accepting calls from Duplex online, although that means Duplex won't update information on Google Maps after verifying information such as business hours. People who ask Duplex to place calls can limit what it shares with businesses—for instance, by keeping their email address private.

In a test of Duplex, an Associated Press reporter acted as a restaurant employee and objected to the call being recorded. Google didn't allow audio or video recording of the demo to be shared, but the transcript went like this:



In this Tuesday, June 26, 2018, photo Valerie Nygaard, product manager for

Google, presents a demo of the Duplex program, which allows the user to book an appointment over the phone, at Oren's Hummus Shop in Mountain View, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Duplex: "Hi, I'd like to make a reservation. I'm Google's automated booking service, so I'll record the call. Um, can I book a table for Saturday, the 30th?"

AP: "Uh, ok, but what if I don't want the call to be recorded?"

Duplex: "Ok, uh we'll call you back on an unrecorded line."

A human operator called back within minutes, completed the booking and said the restaurant would be opted out of receiving Duplex calls in the future.

John Havens, executive director for the IEEE's Global Initiative on Ethics of Autonomous and Intelligent Systems, says Duplex's upfront disclosure leaves him "deeply encouraged."



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As people interact more with artificially intelligent systems, they need to be given clear choices about how they are willing to do so, he said. "You hung up and a human called back. If this becomes the norm, that's great."

Duplex's initial rollout will only cover questions about holiday and weekend hours in the coming weeks, and will be limited to a select group of testers and businesses. The ability to book restaurants or hair appointments will follow later this summer.

Google's main focus is on small businesses that don't accept online

reservations through apps such as Open Table, which the Google Assistant will use to book instead of Duplex if it's available.

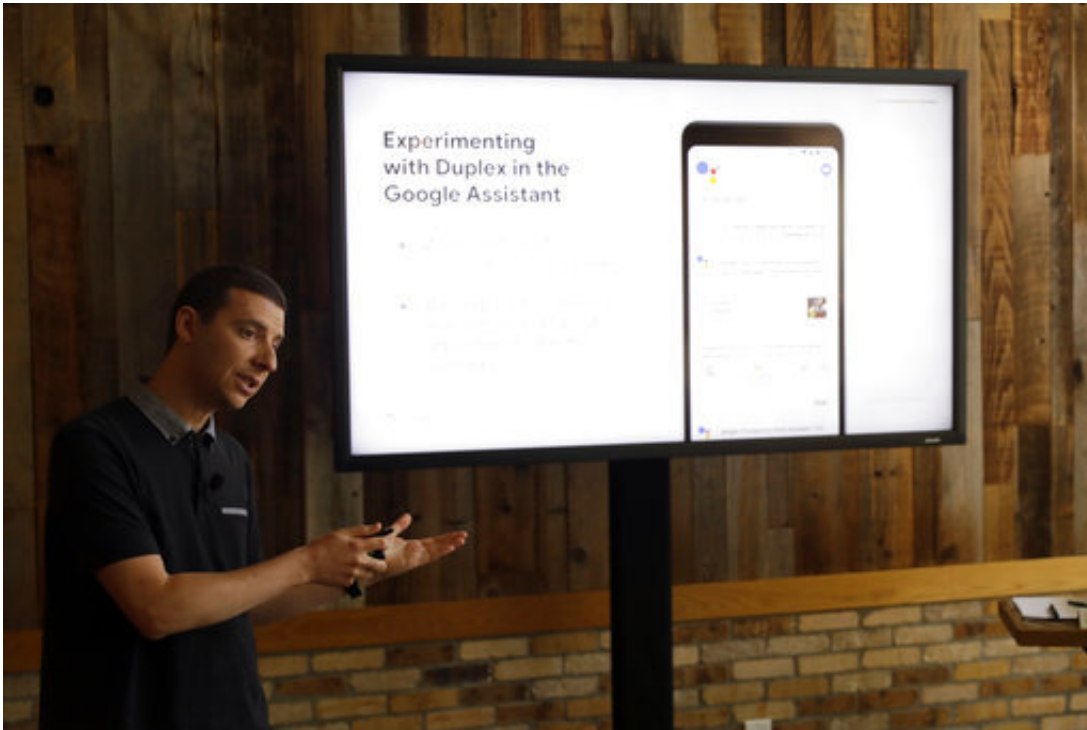
"I think it will just bring more business," said Oren Dobronsky, owner of Oren's Hummus, where Google demonstrated the technology. His restaurant doesn't accept online reservations, and he fears some people just don't call because of the hassle. "Some people prefer not to talk to people. It's removing the friction."

For now, Google has no plans to give third party app developers access to the technology. Nick Fox, Google vice president of product and design for the assistant, said it's too early and Google is still learning how its bot will react with humans in the real world.

"We have seen businesses hang up," he said. "Is it comfortable to talk to, is it strange to talk to? That's what the purpose of this next phase is, to really understand what's working for them, what's not, iterate and go from there."



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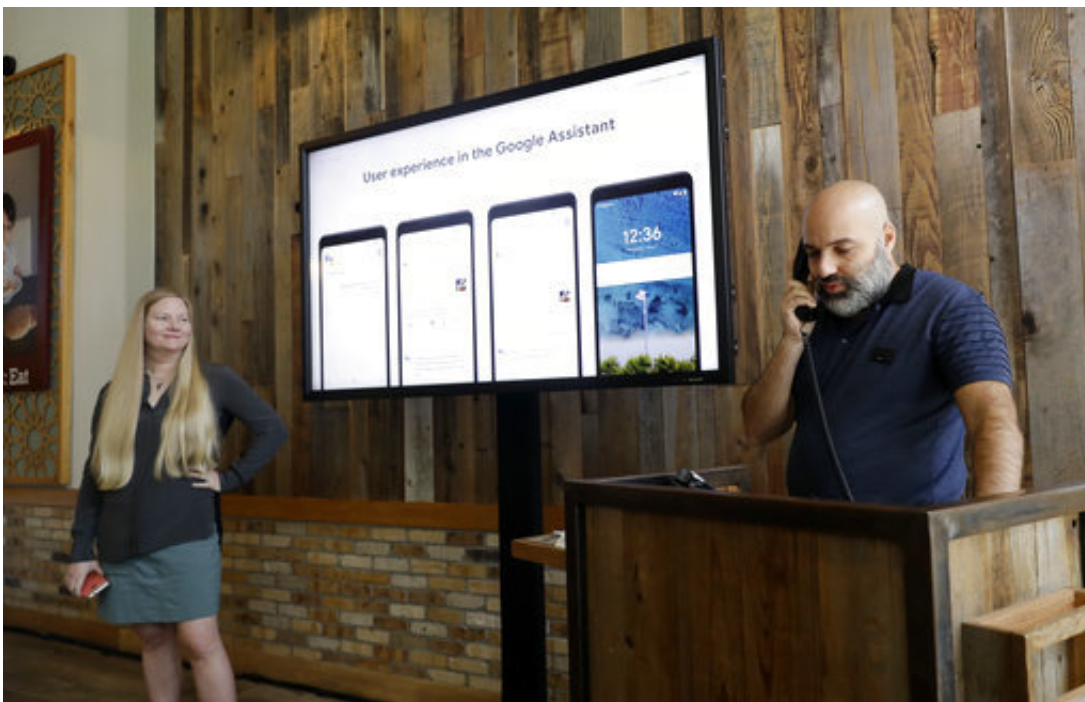
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In this Tuesday, June 26, 2018, photo Oren Dobronsky, right, owner of Oren's Hummus Shop demonstrates the Duplex program, which allows the user to book an appointment over the phone, alongside Valerie Nygaard, left, product manager for Google, in Mountain View, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

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