

The reality behind virtual phones

By Tom Barry
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

A virtual telephone system can help a small or mid-sized business cut costs, boost efficiency, readily connect callers with far-flung employees and make the company appear larger.

Rhonda Duffy, CEO of Alpharetta-based Duffy Realty, a residential real estate firm with seven "inside" employees and 30 agents, signed on with VoiceNation LLC soon after the Buford-based virtual phone company launched in spring 2003.

Duffy said her employees once wasted considerable time and energy connecting callers with the appropriate person. It was the proverbial office pingpong game, often resulting in a written or voicemail message.

By going virtual, the proper person is contacted right away, no matter if that person is on- or off-site, Duffy said.

Virtual also is reality for Sherry Burns, co-owner of two of the nine Plato's Closet stores in metropolitan Atlanta.

Burns said virtual phone service has boosted efficiencies at her Duluth and Buford locations, which sell "gently used" teenage and young adult clothing.

"We advertise as a group and have one central number for all nine stores," said Burns, who describes their

VoiceNation system as "very inexpensive," with overall costs running about \$210 per quarter.



Reeder
VoiceNation

can change their system's settings by logging onto a Web site. Businesses also can get toll-free services, another boon in helping smaller firms appear larger. "A virtual phone

system can make a small company more productive and more available to its customers," said VoiceNation President Jay Reeder, who co-founded the firm with Graham Taylor. "That way it can focus its attention on its core competencies."

One substantial growth area for VoiceNation has been disaster recovery. Software routes calls to predetermined numbers in the event of disaster, and customers are unaware that anything untoward has happened. "You have hurricanes, terrorism and

Off the hook

Benefits of a virtual telephone system for small and mid-sized businesses include:

- ▶ Enhanced connectivity, especially if the company has off-site workers.
- ▶ Increased staff efficiency.
- ▶ No busy signals for customers.
- ▶ No need for a central office.



Taghaddos
GotVMail
Communications

all these other things at the top of people's minds," Reeder said. "But you know what? One of the bigger threats a business owner faces is a power outage." Thirty-employee GotVMail Communications is another company patrolling

the virtual beat.

Among its offerings are toll-free and local services with customized greetings and ability to forward calls anywhere, including to PDAs, cell phones and VoIP phones. Bills average between \$30 and \$40 per month.

"We took a phone system that you'd pay \$10,000 or \$20,000 for and made it Web-based, so that any small business, any entrepreneur, can have the same benefits [as a larger firm]," said President and CEO Siamak Taghaddos.

FreedomVOICE Systems spokesman Bruce Bond said in a crowded marketplace, a toll-free number can confer instant credibility on a smaller company; the 40-employee company offers toll-free voice-messaging among its telecom services.

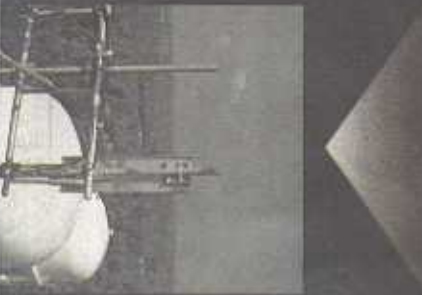
"Companies with a toll-free number have a more credible aspect to them," Bond said. "When John Q. Public buys something, he wants to know he's dealing with a reputable company that will stand behind its products."

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When people call, they're forwarded directly to the store closest to them," Burns said. "If I recall, with our old system there was this endless recording callers heard, and then they had to write the phone number down for the store they wanted. And it didn't do any transferring."

With the virtual system, data is provided as well, she said.

"It tracks how many calls come to the main number and are transferred to the individual stores each month, which you don't get with an ordinary system."

Connectivity is an important part of business today, reflected in the rapid growth of VoiceNation and competitors such as Weston, Mass.-based GoVMail Communications LLC and San Diego, Calif.-based FreedomVOICE Systems.

Virtual telephone systems automatically route callers to the appropriate employee, using phone, wireless and Internet networks. The employee may be in the cubicle next door, at a branch office or on the road.

VoiceNation software, for instance, can be set up so that the system rings a sequential list of numbers until a connection is made or it reaches voicemail.

The software then can take the recording and forward it as an MP3 file in an e-mail, forward a fax as a PDF or ring the person every hour until they retrieve the message.

Various business intelligence reports can be generated as well, such as maps pinpointing call distribution by location, calls by day or hour, average call time and top 25 callers. Customers

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