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'Virtual Admin' Talks While You Work

By Jonathan Blum

These hard times mean it's a good time to take a fresh look at so-called virtual assistants.

We're not talking living, breathing admins who handle administrative chores from afar via the Web and a cell phone. Rather, the automated systems that combine call routing, personalized messaging, conversational agents and now business telephony to make your work time more about work and less about making your office feel and sound like an actual place of business.

Digital virtual assistants have not been a happy layer of the gadget-o-sphere, particularly for the small enterprise. Yes, there has been much dabbling with the technology that seeks to soften the line between what is human and what is not in digital communications. Most major telephony vendors like Alcatel-Lucent(ALU Quote - Cramer on ALU - Stock Picks), Nortel Networks(NT Quote - Cramer on NT - Stock Picks) and Juniper Networks(JNPR Quote - Cramer on JNPR - Stock Picks) -- and to a certain extent, players like Nokia(NOK Quote - Cramer on NOK - Stock Picks), Motorola(MOT Quote - Cramer on MOT - Stock Picks) and even Cisco(CSCO Quote - Cramer on CSCO - Stock Picks) -- have flooded the market with automated attendants, call-routing software and other riffs on synthetic/human interfaces.

And, yes, some of these products are standard issue for larger enterprises. But they are brutally expensive. And the jury is still out as to whether automating the relationship with customers helps or hurts service-oriented small-biz bottom lines.

Enter San Francisco-based Toktumi, (\$14.95 per month per line) the latest entrant in these automated assistant wars. The company is the brainchild of Peter Sisson, 45, who founded and later sold a white-label version of Skype to Microsoft(MSFT Quote - Cramer on MSFT - Stock Picks). Toktumi recently announced a respectable sales deal with Dell(DELL Quote - Cramer on DELL - Stock Picks) and spiffy new features to upgrade a service the company already has with Staples(SPLS Quote - Cramer on SPLS - Stock Picks).

I have spent the past few days tinkering with this jazzed-up Toktumi. And while my final judgment must wait for a full multi-month examination -- there are many, many ways these sorts of tools can frustrate even the most geeked-up small biz -- overall, I found Toktumi to be a reasonably cost effective way to quickly create a phone-based business identity.



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What you get

For a single, fixed monthly rate, you get a second phone number that you can route to your existing phones, both personal and business, landline or mobile. This number becomes the one you give out to your professional contacts. You then provision the system to make and route your calls, give out targeted messages, take phone mail, manage your contacts and many other features. And since the system is using your current phone infrastructure, there should be no noticeable degradation in quality. Not bad.

Toktumi gets lots of credit for easy setup. Simply log in, choose a city, state or area code, and pick a number. You then create a numeric access code. Yup, another number to remember, but what can you do? Next, Toktumi makes a call to your cell phone, asks for your confirmation number and then prompts you through about 10 different intro demos, which are of varying usefulness. All in all, setup is relatively simple. Allow yourself an hour or two, and bring your new-technology sense of humor. You should be fine.

Right off, there is a lot to like: For \$15 a month, the system essentially renders a perfectly reasonable imitation of a real, live business phone. It has a centralized call-management system that lets you tie specific voice messages to a given number. You can monitor calls. It allows you to create a virtual auto attendant that can route calls to different phone lines. And assuming you enable the software for your PC, you can make outbound calls from your computer, too. It's well done for an entry-level system.

In light, early usage in my testing, Toktumi behaved as advertised.

What you don't get

Don't expect complete control over the number you choose, vanity numbers or any sort of coherent set of exchanges for your employees. In the New York area, for example, 212 numbers were not available. The company says that as features grow and it gains more clout, its ability to offer these services will improve.

Also, Toktumi will not win an interface design award. The look and feel is basic. Also, support was email only, as far I could see. And the most important limitation: Toktumi is not a phone. It is a digital service that *runs on* your phone. So every call changes from the one-step process of picking up the phone and making a call into a multi-step affair of accessing the service and then commencing with your business telephony.

In some configurations, that was as simple as dialing a speed dial, and Toktumi does automatically recognize numbers if you so instruct it. But in less-optimal calling situations -- say, on foreign landlines or in high-volume environments -- the system's complexities could easily overwhelm its utility.



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Bottom line

For the small-business newbie, or the operation that has light phone usage and wants to save some cash on business extensions, Toktumi is worth considering. But move slowly. This is your customer, after all, who is getting handed around by what is in effect a virtual dumb waiter.

But considering that \$9,000 a year is not that much money for a small-business to spend on phone service, a product that can cut those fees in way more than half is certainly worth considering.



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