

You, too, can have a call center

SCI-TECH SCENE | Ifbyphone's software sets up virtual feature for small businesses

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Experts advise even small- and medium-sized businesses to set up Web sites, blogs, podcasts and Facebook pages, but they rarely mention the humble telephone.

Skokie tech innovator Ifbyphone sees an opportunity in the omission: Its software applications let small businesses set up virtual call centers and make "live" contact with potential customers without having to hire technicians and phone operators.

"We're in the business of providing all of the phone features that a Fortune 500 company would use in a way that's instant and cost effective," said Irv Shapiro, CEO of Ifbyphone and founder of Chicago technology companies Metamor and Edventions.



That means a small lawn-care business could ask a surfer on its Web site, at a crucial point, whether the surfer wanted to be called at home. If the answer is yes, the surfer's phone rings and the business has a greater chance to close a sale, Shapiro said.

Another offer lets companies buy two toll-free telephone numbers from Ifbyphone's Web site, set them up instantly and use them in advertisements to track customer response. The calls can be routed to any phone the CEO specifies. "If Uncle Joe is helping cover the phones while the receptionist is out, the calls go to him," Shapiro said.

A third offering lets companies use automated telephony to call customers to remind them of delivery times and, if the customer cannot be there, to reschedule. Responses to the ads can be distributed in a "smart" way so that a company can hire part-time, in-home workers to create a virtual call center.

Companies pay \$15 to \$40 a month for various packages of 100 minutes of calls per month, or prepay for a lower call-per-minute fee.

The telephone application market is so hot, IfbyPhone rival Ribbit was acquired on July 29 by British Telecom for \$105 million, even though Ribbit was a few months old and had no revenue.

Ifbyphone has recently introduced these other offerings:

- An iPhone application, rolled out on July 7, lets users send a recorded message to an unlimited number of people without having to pay extra iPhone calling plan minutes. The iPhone displays a record of who did and did not receive the message and which calls went to an answering machine. More than 4,000 people downloaded the application within the first few weeks it was available.
- A store locator application that can be set up online in minutes, bypassing the need for technicians or telephone company intervention.

Dan Caffee, CEO of Neutron Interactive, a Salt Lake City online marketing firm, said it uses Ifbyphone's technology to track responses to clients' marketing campaigns. Neutron Interactive specializes in helping the trucking industry and degree-certification schools make quick hires, whether it's hiring truck drivers or medical assistants.

"We can give quick and good feedback to clients about the kinds of responses they're getting from their [marketing] campaigns," Caffee said. "It gives us more credibility with clients."

Jon Arnold, principal of JArnold & Associates and a telecom analyst, said the business of blending voice technologies and the Internet is "a lot like the Wild West" because its applications are so new. Arnold credited Ifbyphone with using interactive voice technologies to create "real world" business applications that can be tailored to suit a variety of businesses' needs.

"When people think about putting traditional telephony applications on the Web, it makes sense because the cost, time and complexity barriers fall away," Arnold said.

The insight reflects Shapiro's adherence to business guru Tom Peters' mantra that to succeed, every customer must be a "raving fan."

"Across every business I've built, I've insisted that we deliver extraordinary customer service," he said. "I believe that's still the best way to differentiate a business in America. Customers appreciate and respect companies with great service."