

Why Google Voice is free

Of all the free services Google Voice provides, it's likely that transcription of voicemails is the most expensive for Google. Users tell me that transcription is very accurate, which probably means humans are doing it. My guess is that short, easy messages are machine-transcribed, but that longer messages are off-shored to human transcribers.

If Google is really paying so much for quality transcription, that gives us a clue about why Google is giving it away. The give-away makes sense only if you are clear on who Google's customers are -- and what Google's product is.

The common assumption that Google's customers are its users is false. As a Google user, when is the last time you paid Google for services rendered?

Google users are the "product" -- users are not Google's customers. By this I mean that Google is selling information about its users to advertisers, which are the company's real customers.

New services offered by Google are how Google improves its 'product.' They're making a better you -- or, at least, they're making you a more transparent consumer.

Contextual advertising is the richest kind. If a company can offer advertisers access to people who are likely to want advertised products, it can charge a fortune for those ads. And this is what Google intends to do, and on a massive scale.

I'm going to give it to you straight: I believe Google Voice is free because Google wants to track your phone calls, read your voicemails and text messages and invade your privacy to offer you up on a silver platter to advertisers.

Let's look at the big picture. Google already scans and indexes all your Gmail e-mail messages. It uses Google Maps and its hooks into your phone's GPS to know exactly where you are. With Google Voice, it will know who you call and who calls you

and how often. It will know what your voice messages and text messages say. The data extractable from all this is worth a fortune to advertisers -- and to Google.

Think I'm paranoid? Take 20 seconds to prove it to yourself. Go check the advertising that accompanies your Gmail e-mail. Just click through the messages, see what the e-mails are about, then notice how the ads on the right hand side of the page map exactly with the subject of those e-mails. Google computers are serving up ads based on the subject matter of your private conversations.

Gmail's invasion of your personal messages is just the beginning. In the future, I believe the company intends to combine what it knows about you -- friends, family, purchases, location, schedule, blog posts and especially what you talk about in e-mail, text messages, chat and telephone calls -- into knowledge about what you want to buy. It will then show you ads based on that knowledge.

Given all this, it seems clear to me that the main purpose for the transcription service is to get your permission for Google to read your voice-mails for contextual advertising.

If all this sounds sinister, it isn't. This is simply where advertising is going. Most people have demonstrated willingness to give up privacy for free stuff. And in fact, contextual advertising itself is desirable. It's better to be pitched products you're likely to want rather than products you don't want.

So if and when you get your Google Voice invitation, enjoy its powerful features. But have no illusions about what's the service is all about. Google is paying you in the form of great new service for the opportunity to tell advertisers exactly who you are and what you want.

In other words: You're paying for Google Voice -- not with money, but with your privacy.

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