



## Trying Telephone Trigonometry

**What happened** to the great telephone revolution? You know, the one where we would be able browse to our favorite restaurant's Web site on our Internet connected cellular telephones to order take-out or make a reservation. And what happened to being able to call long distance and talking all day with friends and prospects alike for free over the Internet?

Whatever happened to all those great things people said were coming?

It seems to me that recent advancements in telephone technology in general have come to a screeching halt. I know, it's the economy! After all, there must be some excuse. Looking back, it becomes apparent that some of these technologies never got ready for prime time, at least not yet.

### My Poor Cell

It's not that I am complaining, but I am. My cellular telephone service seems to keep getting worse. I don't know if it is because my telephone is overworked or that the local overburdened cellular telephone system can't keep up. Dropped calls are a consistent problem that interferes with the automated agent's work-from-anywhere philosophy and professionalism. I am in the market for a new provider.

Today's Internet capable cellular telephones, while not as clunky and awkward to use as previous versions, still are too slow to be really convenient.

This brings me to the point in a roundabout way. The importance of keeping in touch is paramount for the producer on the go, or for any producer for that matter. As an example, in 1974, almost 30 years ago, my father, Mr. Gadget, welded a portable briefcase telephone to his bicycle during the oil embargo so he could make business calls while riding the three miles to and from work.

**BC = sin A**

I was inspired to delve into the telephony side of things recently as a result of my own agency's growing need to replace its telephone system. Trying to find a good small business telephone system that did not stress the mind or budget at times seemed almost impossible. When I found a system in the right price range, it did not do everything I needed. When I finally found something that had all the bells and whistles, the price was prohibitive.

Most agencies are small businesses with big business requirements. It should not be necessary to take out a second mortgage to accomplish some simple tasks. What is an automated agent to do?

I theorize it this way. Putting a business telephone system together is much like doing trigonometry. If someone keeps changing the variables, he or she gets differing results. While one company's PBX system looks good, the software integration might be limited or too expensive. Or maybe the software that does everything the producer wants does not work with his or her current telephone system. Getting all sides of the equation right takes some research. Eventually, though, a happy medium can be reached and the producer will have a telephone system that does everything he wants.

Seeing a prospective business telephone system in action is a challenge in itself. Most systems are sold and installed by small companies that have no budget for setting up displays or showrooms. The closest thing available in my area was a book full of brochures with long lists of features along with their benefits and some glossy pictures. Many competing companies produce a dizzying array of add-ons, which compounds the problem.

My agency's needs, while probably a little more sophisticated than most, are not all that demanding. We needed some multi-line cordless telephones here, some music on hold there, voice mail, conference calling, call and remote message forwarding, plus some integration into our existing database. These probably are standard features any agency would want.

After some research, we decided that we also wanted to ensure future expansion in our system. It was important to us to allow for the ability of adding off-site extensions, VoIP (Voice over IP), and video conferencing capabilities to help facilitate producers who work from home in the future.

### **Popping My Screen TAPI Style**

We also needed to connect and log incoming telephone calls to our information management system. This requirement quickly shortened the list of prospective telephone systems. A telephone system that enables such integration would need to be "TAPI compliant." TAPI

stands for Telephony Application Programming Interface; it enables computers with properly programmed software to communicate information to and from the telephone system.

Most, but not all, TAPI enabled telephone systems run on cards installed into a standard desktop computer. All of the information, announcements, and call recordings are stored on the computer's hard drive and controlled by software. I found several systems at a comfortable pricing point in this configuration that would do everything required while allowing for plenty of expansion in the future.

A system such as this also allows for "screen popping," which is a networked computer's ability to display the information on incoming calls, bring up the client's information, route the call to the proper producer, and even log the call to the producer's record. Conversely, the system also can log outgoing calls to the client record. We also added the option of recording telephone conversations; it was a nice, cost-effective feature.

#### VoIP Compliant

Enabling voice communications over networks and the Internet is still a young technology. Voice over IP has not blossomed as quickly as hoped; continuing development and a slow down trend in pricing, however, will make this a viable option over the next few years.

The advantages of VoIP are tremendous. Imagine having hundreds or even thousands of producers or branch offices all over the world and never having to pay a long distance bill. Converging voice, data, and video over one connection would make this possible. Everyone could communicate and access the agency's network by being hooked to a high-speed Internet connection. The possibilities are exciting.

To establish a Voice over IP system, a pair of "gateways" are needed, one on each end. The gateways are the heart of a VoIP system. They convert analog signals to digital information packets that can be transmitted over the Internet. A minimum configuration costs about \$1,000 for a one-line system.

There is still much progress to be made in VoIP, but I see it as a sign of things to come. Some great information on this subject can be found at [www.internetwk.com/IPT/](http://www.internetwk.com/IPT/).

While we wait for the technology bandwagon to start up again, now may be a good time to re-calculate how that old telephone system fulfills its role in the producer's or agency's current environment. Taking the time to address and measure current and future needs today will help ensure a smooth transition to future telephone technologies.