

## FOLLOW-ME FINDS A HOME

**A hands-on look at how six vendors are folding the one-number "follow-me" app into more "mass" communication solutions.**

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The so-called "one-number follow-me" application automates people-finding. As phone calls come in, the system checks pre-defined schedules of where people are supposed to be or possibly are and either tries a series of numbers in priority order or (faster) blasts out calls to a bunch of numbers simultaneously.

When it hits the intended called party, it connects in the other line (or tells another switch to do so) without any extended effort on the caller's part.

Not bad, huh? After all, it means more connections between business and customers, less callbacks and a decline of the dreaded "phone tag" game.

But let's face it. Despite the fact that follow-me looks so nice on the drawing board, it's still not an application you run into much. More than nine times out of 10, voicemail remains on the other end of that greeting file, doesn't it? One-number follows few. How come?

Well, a good five or six years after the app was first broached by such pioneers as Priority Call Management and MCI, the main reason for its sluggish acceptance now seems fairly obvious:

- For all but the most rabid road warriors, deploying one-number follow-me, by itself, has simply been

too much trouble for the average worker and generic enterprise to warrant its power and, to a lesser extent, cost.

Especially when one also considers that most modern day phone systems, when manually instructed, can at least blindly forward calls to single, remote sites; most people's worlds won't end if their calls are sent to voicemail; and, though it sounds great, most people don't want to be constantly "connected."

Most, however, wouldn't mind dipping into the app when appropriate and cost effective, which, it's beginning to appear more and more likely, is exactly how follow-me will finally find its home: not standalone, but rolled into a larger whole, where its assets (and price tag) fold into a more complete communication solution.

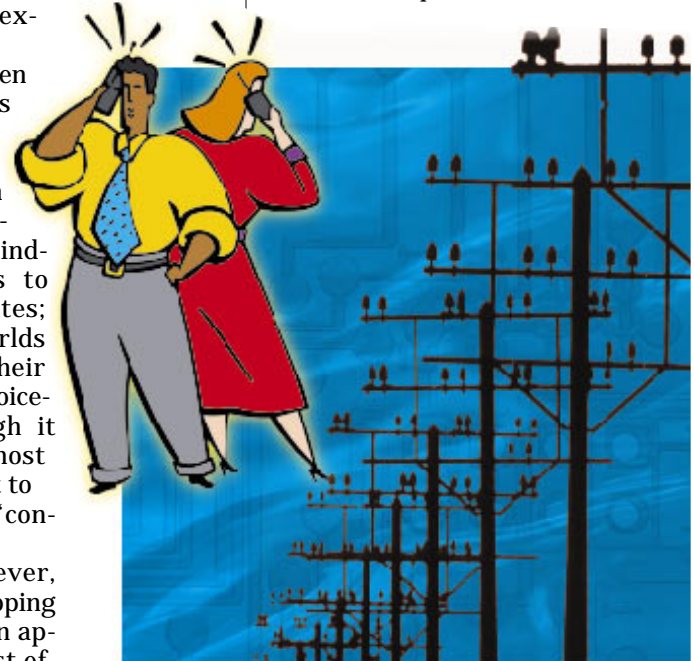
As the following comparison indicates, there is now considerable movement to support this theory on both of CT's fronts.

### ENHANCED SERVICES

Here, more affordable, more robust and more programmable board-level resources are quite simply re-writing the rules of what service providers can get away with in the network ether.

Recently, Steve Lange of Advanced Queuing Systems, an exciting new national "Virtual PBX" service provider, put it to us plain:

"It used to be a company that wanted to get into network-based services had to purchase a \$100,000 switch, then write custom software that ran on one computer and communicated with the switch over an RS-232 serial port.



"It took a long time to write and it was hard to modify and upgrade. The voice-processing functions were also normally housed in separate computers, adding to the expense and communications overhead.

"With the new systems, an individual can spend \$10,000 on a PC with a combination digital phone interface / switching / voice resource card, work for a few months writing

software in a familiar programming language, and have a sophisticated switch that can handle any telephony app you can think of.”

Naturally, with so much affordable flexibility at their fingertips, would-be CT enhanced-service providers are no longer just thinking in terms of single app creation. Instead, as vendors like AQS and StarTouch International and Webley indicate, they're shooting for a larger, more inclusive ball of application wax.

Of course, the technology Mr. Lange refers to here is also, he admits himself, creating another bar-raising market force — competition.

“Within five years you're going to see hundreds of these types of services offered,” Steve said. “It's just too easy to write a switching application these days with all this new PC-based hardware.”

## THE ENTERPRISE

Really, it's the same evolutionary process as above — the same technology and the same replacement of old, closed monolithic telephony gear — just on a different scale.

So instead of talking about CO adjuncts, we're talking about enterprise-based all-in-one communication servers that completely obsolete the need for, among other things, a mainframe-like Private Branch Exchange (PBX) switch.

These comm-server systems, with their extremely flexible underlying switching fabric and GUI client / server administration screens, absolutely lend themselves to one-number follow-me... along with all the basic call-handling routines that encompass a PBX's complete functionality.

In fact, many times as we go through the litany of “comm server” features, we often forget to include that most offer follow-me out-of-box — with no outside switch / server / software required. It comes built in, ready for those who need it and those who don't.

Of course, how well the system pulls off the follow-me app is another story, which leads us to...

## THE COMPARISON

Although we did break it up along enhanced services and comm server lines, the criteria of our comparison remained the same across both areas of development. In each case, we looked for how well vendors did in taking care of key follow-me features.

Of course, in keeping with our theory, we also conclude the individual write-ups with a brief description of “other things” vendors provide their users.

Follow-me things we graded on:

- Voicemail option. It's important to let callers opt to “follow” people or just leave voicemail — both at the onset of the follow-me procedure and during it.

*Basic Question:* how easy does the system make this on the caller?

- Caller screening. This is critical. You may not want every Tom, Dick and Harry Newton finding you. In this case, you'll want to know what each of the vendors provides here.

The most basic way of handling the “who's calling” dilemma is simple voice screening. At the onset of the follow-me app, the caller is asked to speak his / her name, which is replayed to the subscriber. From there, the subscriber can reject the call and send it to voicemail or take it.

Some can also require callers to enter a password before “following” to other numbers — a very reliable “pest” screening feature.

Still others can factor in Caller ID, i.e. only calls from such and such numbers are allowed to “follow me,” which can be very slick (including custom prompts, etc.).

*Basic Question:* What does the system provide on this front?

- Subscriber screening. Simple call announcement not only plays the caller's name but also a little “this call is for” prompt when someone picks up the follow-me call.

It can be — among other things — a hotel-operator buster.

A step further requires the answerer to enter a password to get connected to follow-me callers, which prevents — among other people — your three-year old from babbling long-distance to your big boss or customer.

*Basic Question:* What does the system provide on this front?

- Sequential or blast. One-number follow-me outdials can be done two different ways: sequentially (aka. “serially”) or simultaneously.

The first takes a single outbound line and tries one follow-me number after another in priority order until it finds the intended party and connects the caller. The second uses a group of lines and blasts out the calls to all numbers at the same time.

Which one is best depends. Callers will prefer simultaneous outdial because it's the fastest (assuming you have more than two active numbers in your follow-me list). But this has to be weighed against the extra line requirements it forces on the end user or service bureau.

There's a cost issue too. If you make all your follow-me outgoing calls at the same time, it will cost more in phone line charges. And it increases the chances of someone other than the intended party picking up a call, thus generating more hard line costs.

*Basic Question:* Does the system at least offer a choice?

- Ease of use. As we played with these systems and the follow-me app, we realized how crucial this is.

One thing's for sure. Users, no matter how seemingly sedentary, will be changing how follow-me works all the time.

Take us. As writers for this magazine, we're not exactly mobile workers. We do spend a lot of time sitting in front of a PC. Still, as we played with these systems, we realized that even we were constantly tweaking the way our test systems were following us.

Hey, nothing worse than coming back from lunch and finding 14 voicemails, right? No problem — we

realized we could take calls while standing in line at the corner sandwich shop.

Baby-sitter late again? Let us tell the system to start sending callers to the old home number until she arrives...

Gotta leave a little early to drop off some paperwork at the corporate HQ? Gotta pick up mom at the airport? Gotta drive to that vendor meeting? Gotta have a smoke?

You get the picture.

Of course, how simple or complex setting up / changing how calls are routed is the crux here, especially for the service providers, who, despite some Web integration, must rely primarily on a naturally limiting Telephone User Interface (TUI).

Things we graded on included how easy it was to generally navigate around the follow-me TUI and, where available, GUI and how easy it was to establish and maintain a set of follow-me numbers and calling patterns. That included, we should mention, how easy it was to tell the system to send calls to a single number when you knew, for sure, that was the place where you were going to be for x amount of time.

>From there, we checked how easy creating follow-me schedules was, including establishing routing rules based on time of day / day of week and "profiles" that reflect where you are and how available you are depending on time of day / day of week.

>From an administrative view, we also look at how easy / difficult it was to specify classes of follow-me phone numbers authorized for outdialing (internal, outside local, outside long distance, outside international) for different subscribers (if appropriate).

Overall, we can't stress how critical this topic is... if people can't change the system easily, they likely won't make good use of the app.

● Dialing through auto attendants:

We purposely made each system handle this. Some took care of it easy. Some difficult. Some had technical difficulties.

Even for one-person operations (key targets for service-bureau one-number apps), we felt this was important. People stay in hotels. People visit other companies. Etc.

● Handling multiple calls: Question: how did the systems handle multiple calls (i.e. what happens if you're talking to one caller at a remote follow-me location — e.g. a cellphone — and

another caller wants to connect?). It happens.

● System performance: How was sound quality? Were there any dialing difficulties? Dropped calls? How many numbers supported? Etc.

● Cost. Just remember, this should be carefully weighed against the "other things" the vendors provide along with follow me. In the case of most (at least in this feature), you could consider the app an inexpensive throw-in.

## SERVICES

### ADVANCED QUEUING SYSTEMS

● Contact Info: 888-825-0800; [www.aqsys.com](http://www.aqsys.com)

● Name of service: The CrossPoint VirtualPBX

● Basic platform notes: Mostly Dialogic hardware; application written with Parity VOS software.

● Voicemail option: Because this system acts a multi-person, premise-based phone-system replacement, it doesn't offer this escape without trying the extension first.

Like any CPE system, it will attempt to ring a selected person's desktop first — the big difference is that desktop could be one of four different numbers / places.

Grade: Incomplete — not appropriate for this type of system.

● Caller screening: Basic caller screening is offered.

Grade: B.

● Subscriber screening: It will announce for whom the call tolls (as well as from whom).

Grade: B.

● Sequential or blast: Currently only handles sequential hunting to up to four numbers (again, for each extension behind the system).

Grade: B.

● Dialing through auto attendants: Because of its business-system approach, AQS added a lot of functionality here that the others didn't. For example, you can precisely time, down to the millisecond, call-progress factors in order to integrate their VirtualPBX with more traditional phone systems and CO equipment.

Grade: A+.

● Handling multiple calls: They don't do this. If you're handling one call through CrossPoint and another comes in, the second caller is automatically sent to voicemail.

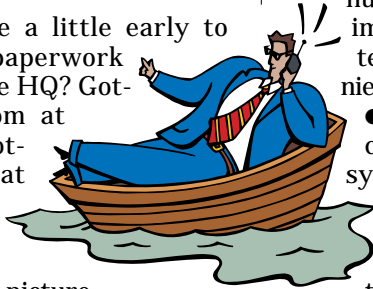
Grade: Incomplete — it shouldn't be; AQS told us they plan on adding call-waiting soon.

● Ease of use: Follow me is only a small part of the CrossPoint VirtualPBX — a very small part. We're talking a system that can act as a "virtual" replacement of a multi-party business phone system — again, with the added bonus of finding all your people at up to four different phone numbers at any given time.

Overall, then, its TUI is fairly complex. At first, you'll find yourself a little lost in its ocean of menu options. But it's as good as it gets. And the maintaining and toggling between the follow-me numbers is quite easy.

One other thing: AQS tries to set things up as much as possible in advance. This means you e-mail them a list of all your employees, extension numbers, passwords, etc., and things are pretty much ready to go when you — or your customers — first call in.

Grade: A- — They could really use a Web-based GUI. It would make it a lot easier on the adminis-



## One-Number Follow-Me

trator of the system. Regular users don't really need it.

- **System performance:** During our tests, the system worked flawlessly.

Grade: A.

- **Cost:** AQS is upfront and straightforward here. Figure calling charges of around 10 cents a minute in Northern California and 14 cents a minute nationwide.

There is an annual maintenance fee that includes creating the VirtualPBX for the client, music-on-hold licensing fees and technical support, payable in advance. The fee is based on the maximum number of extensions that can be

defined in the system.

For 10 extensions, this fee is \$100.

For 1,000 extensions, this fee is \$2,500. Compare that with a 1,000-extension PBX. Peanuts.

They also offer something called the CrossPoint PBXParachute. This is a great service. Basically, it's disaster proofing for your business, wherein AQS will keep a hot-standby phone system ready for you in case something real ugly happens. Here, a 10-extension system costs \$20.

Perfect for dealing with new system cutovers. Heck, a reseller could throw it in for free to the customer.

Grade: A+ — when you consider what you're getting.

- **Other Things:** Definitely not just a one-number follow-me system. We're really talking a full PBX-like system here with super integrated voice / fax mail. Unlike the other enhanced services in this comparison, it's not really for a single subscriber, but a group of people working within a singular enterprise.

Among other things, it's perfect for a new small company that doesn't have a phone system and doesn't even have an office.

It even has some ACD functions built in, allowing you to create a virtual call center.