

No Time, Not Enough Staff?

Make Your Phone System Work Harder

In the last year or so, a new world of phone-system choices has opened up. No matter how small your organization, you have many new options.

BY PETER SANTEUSANIO

For most nonprofits, there are never enough people to answer the phones. Callers want to know about programs and services. Board members need to connect. Volunteers want information. And the overworked staff is struggling to juggle it all.

Till recently, there were two good reasons why nonprofits avoided upgrading their phone systems: cost and complexity. A typical phone system, equipped with basic voice mail, often ran as high as \$10,000—more than most nonprofits could justify, even in the name of service.

These systems also were quite complex to install, configure, and administer, particularly for busy offices with little in-house technology expertise. No wonder most small organizations relied on a basic two-line phone for all their communications needs. As late as 1997, 85% of companies with less than 25 people had nothing other than a two-line phone, according to International

Data Corporation, a market research firm based in Framingham, Massachusetts.

New Choices

Now nonprofits have other options, from expanded services from the local phone company to a slew of innovative products. New telecommunications tools give even the smallest, most short-staffed organization the ability to serve its many constituencies, while reducing the costs of handling routine inquiries.

These new phone systems provide flexible options as the organization's needs change. They're also surprisingly affordable and well suited to addressing the needs of diverse

constituencies, programs, and services with integrated call forwarding, voice mail, and teleconferencing. An example is the Bizfon system, designed for organizations with 25 or fewer employees. For under \$1,000, the Bizfon Standard Bundle offers big-business features for a small business price.

In most regions, the local telephone company also offers a range of business services, which may appear attractive but can be quite costly, particularly as an organization expands. A basic package with call waiting, voice mail, and call forwarding can easily boost the price of a single line to more than \$50 a month per line. The new phone systems can be leased for about the same price for the entire office.

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How Can a Phone System Deliver More?

Multiple Mailboxes

With distinct and separate extensions, board members, interns, volunteers, beneficiaries, and the general public can each receive targeted information that addresses their particular areas of interest. In addition, multiple mailboxes automatically organize and segment calls for departments and staff. For instance, all calls regarding an upcoming fundraiser can be automatically routed to an extension with an informative recording, or to the person responsible for managing tickets.

24-Hour Access

In a world of the 60-hour work-week, there's still not enough time to get everything done. An intelligent phone system ensures that callers can get the answers to routine questions and leave confidential messages after-hours. Of course, staff members can retrieve messages day or night.

Professional Outgoing Messages

With a professional outgoing message, directions to the office, dates of upcoming board meetings, and information on dropping off donations for emergency relief drives are presented accurately and efficiently.

Personal Touch and More Responsiveness

Many organizations want to offer a personal touch, but can't always free up staff to answer calls, particularly during peak times. A flexible voice mail system can be programmed to respond to incoming calls after the third or fourth ring, while still giving callers the option to leave voice mail or wait for an operator.

Off Site Connectivity

Project leaders and volunteers who work off-site can route incoming calls to their home, another location, or even a pager. This is perfect for on-the-go fundraisers who need to respond quickly.

Simplified Conference Calling

The rapid pace of change means that board members are more in demand and less likely to be able to attend frequent meetings. New phone systems let board or committee members dial into a common extension and be connected immediately to a conference call, without the expense of using an outside service.

Better Internal Organization and Efficiency

Automating basic communication lets employees spend more time creating new programs and reaching new audiences. Less time is spent returning phone calls confirming meeting times, event dates, and deadlines for submission. With individual mailboxes for both employees and programs, the organization can deliver and receive information efficiently and promptly.

Flexibility for Growth

It's essential to plan for growth—whether that means new services or alliances with partner organizations. Some of the newer phone systems offer a universal extension number that stays with staff members, even if they move offices.

Immediate Access for VIPs

Certain donors, board members, and VIPs need extra attention. Letting them know that they can always reach a receptionist or someone else is an important element in managing these relationships.

Larger organizations often consider CENTREX, the central phone switching service provided by the telephone company. The appeal is that the telephone company handles the equipment and service, eliminating the up-front investment. But because each new line entails an additional set-up and monthly fee, this can become the most expensive option over time, particularly as the organization grows.

As with any technology purchase, the key is understanding current and future requirements. You need to be clear about which features are critical and which are merely nice-to-have. Before investing in any phone system, consider the following:

- **Price.** Full systems still range from several thousand dollars, without voice mail, to more than \$10,000. Compare functions to ensure that the so-called bargain delivers what you need. Be sure to compare apples to apples: Does each system provide voice mail, automated attendant, music-on-hold, etc.? Does the price include upgrades and maintenance? If not, how much will maintaining and upgrading the system add to the true cost?
- **Features.** Identify the critical features. Should the phone system seamlessly forward calls to volunteers who work at home or in other locations? Should board members or other off-site staff be able to dial in for conference calling, without the bother of a third-party service? Should callers be able to exit out of voice mail for an operator? Should professionally recorded greetings and messages be available? Who will handle the inevitable moves and changes? Will the phone system support Internet telephony? When?

■ **Flexibility.** An organization may need only four lines today but more next year. This may exceed the limits of many smaller systems. Understand the ultimate upgrade path and how to protect your investment.

■ **Sales and support.** Most phone systems are still sold through dealers, who customize them as needed and handle installation. However, this adds to the cost. Is it possible to buy direct? Does leasing make sense?

■ **Customer service.** Drill down to find out the specifics of the support program. Does it include system adjustments and modifications, or does it cover only system breakdowns and failures? How long will it take to make a change? What's the cost of installation? Can the phone system be installed internally by a staff member or does it require an out-

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side service provider? Can changes and upgrades be done simply with a telephone call, without requiring on-site service?

Today, most nonprofits have so much on the plate that it's easy to overlook the phone system—as long as there's a dial tone. By approaching the office phone set-up as a system, rather than a haphazard collection of fax, answering machine, and phones, even the most cash-strapped organization can discover a positive relationship between the phone line and its ability to be available, informative, and responsive. ■



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