



**Matthew Ferrara
& Company**

Today's Insight

New Web Services Provide Voice Mail Options

You know the routine – you set up a personalized greeting on your cell phone, people leave messages after the beep and you retrieve your voice mail messages by dialing in to your cell phone's message center. Not a big deal. Most of us can do that while driving 80 miles per hour, drinking hot coffee and reaching into the back seat for a bag of chips.

There are now a couple of free web-based voice mail services that will allow you to do more with your messages than just retrieve and listen to them. These services are "YouMail" and "GrandCentral."

YouMail offers a feature that lets you create an unlimited number of personalized greetings (so you can create a personal greeting for everyone in your contact list – such as "Hi Mom, I'm not ignoring you, I'm just really busy....."). It also allows you the option to save your voice mail messages, email them via audio files, share messages via a URL link, retrieve deleted messages and find out who called and when they left a message. All of these things can be done online or from your phone (if your phone has Internet capabilities).

You can also check your voice mail messages by phone or online. Checking messages by phone is pretty much the same as how you normally retrieve your messages. You call a number and log into your voice mail box. Checking your messages online is simple as well. You log into your YouMail account and click on the "My Voicemail" option. Then, just turn up your speakers and listen to your messages. Messages can be stored in your online account for as long as you'd like and an email audio file is created as backup.

Signing up for YouMail is pretty easy. You register your cell phone number and email address. YouMail will automatically send a confirmation text message directly to your cell phone letting you know that your account has been created. Switching from your existing voice mail service to YouMail is also pretty easy. You can also switch back at any time. Instructions are on the YouMail site.

A couple of notes about YouMail – the access number to retrieve your voice mail messages by phone is a long distance number. So, if you retrieve messages by phone a lot, it could get a little pricey. And, if you would like to receive a text message each time someone leaves you a voice mail message, you will probably be charged for the text message – depending on the type of text messaging plan you have with your carrier. But, the text messaging feature can be turned off.

GrandCentral (which is a Google™ service) has similar features and options. One thing you should know is that GrandCentral is in beta testing right now and you have to be invited by a member to register for the service. An interesting feature that GrandCentral offers is one unified number that you can link your cell, home and work numbers to. You can then give one number out to family, friends and clients. When they call this number, all of your phones will ring. When you answer the phone, you'll hear a message that informs you of whose calling. You then have options for how you would like to handle the call (answer it, let it go to voice mail, listen while the message is being taken or accept and record the call). The caller will only hear the phone ringing on their end.

In order for the system to know who is calling, you will have to set up your address book through your online account. You can also establish personalized greetings for your contacts (just like with YouMail). If someone who is not in your address book calls you, the system will identify them as a new caller and will require them to say their name when they call. The system will then load and store that information so that it will recognize the caller when they call again.

Both services allow “block caller” options as well. Not that we would ever want to block someone from calling us.....but, a nice feature just in case you win the lottery and your long-lost relatives suddenly take an interest in you.....

Check out these services at www.youmail.com and www.grandcentral.com.

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