



AUTO ATTENDANT / RESEARCH & PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

IVR vs Auto Attendant vs Phone Tree: What the Terms Mean

Get a business phone number with a simple auto attendant menu from Auto Attendant. A caller picks who they need and the call rings that person's own mobile, so nobody on your team has to publish a personal number.

Published by Auto Attendant · 2026-10-29 · difference between auto attendant and ivr · ivr vs auto attendant · what is ivr · automated attendant · electronic receptionist

Original article: <https://autoattendant.io/articles/ivr-vs-auto-attendant-vs-phone-tree>



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The short answer

"Phone tree", "voice menu", "auto attendant" and "IVR" overlap so much that vendors use them for the same product. No standards body publishes an official definition of "auto attendant", so the distinctions below are common industry usage, not a legal taxonomy. The one line that matters most when comparing products: an **auto attendant routes the call** based on a key the caller presses, while an **IVR** (interactive voice response) can also **collect information and act on it**, such as reading out a balance or taking a payment. Call queues, hunt groups and AI receptionists are separate things that often get sold under the same words.

Term	Also called	What it usually means	Quick test
Phone tree	Phone menu, automated phone tree, voice menu	The caller-facing experience: "for X, press 1"	Describes what the caller hears
Auto attendant	Automated attendant, virtual or electronic receptionist	A system that answers and routes calls by menu choice	Does it only send the call somewhere?
IVR	Interactive voice response	Voice applications that prompt, collect input and can look things up	Does it read or write data?
Call queue	ACD queue, hold queue	Callers wait on hold until an agent is free	Do callers wait in line?
Hunt group / ring group	Serial ring, sequential ring, simultaneous ring	One number rings several phones, in order or together	Is there a menu at all?
AI receptionist	Voice agent, AI phone agent	Conversational software that answers and routes without a fixed menu	Does the caller speak freely?

For the full definition and history, see [What is an auto attendant?](#). This page is about vocabulary: what each word signals in a vendor's pitch.

Why the terms are fuzzy

The words come from different communities. Usability researchers write about "phone-tree systems" ([NN/g, 16 Usability Guidelines](#)). Engineers at the IETF write about IVR as a service an application server provides ([RFC 5552](#)). Phone system vendors sell "auto attendants" ([Microsoft Learn](#)). Regulators use yet another term: US accessibility rules define an "interactive menu" as a feature that lets a provider transmit information to a caller "in visual and/or audible format" for management, control or operations of a telecommunications product ([47 CFR § 7.3\(e\)](#)), and the FCC's February 25, 2026 notice on accessibility recordkeeping still lists "interactive menu service" providers as a covered category ([FCC DA 26-190](#)). That regulatory term is about accessibility obligations, not a product definition; this is educational information, not legal advice, and reflects the rules as of October 2026.

Even "attendant" has shifted meaning. The ATIS Telecom Glossary, a North American industry reference, defines an "attendant position" as the part of a switching system used by "an operator" to help users complete calls ([ATIS](#)). An attendant was a person. The "auto" in auto attendant is the machine that took over that job, and a search of the same glossary in October 2026 found no entry for "auto attendant". Its IVR entry is an acronym expansion with no definition ([ATIS](#)).

The practical consequence: when two vendors use different words, compare what the system does, not what it is called.

Phone tree and voice menu: the caller's view

"Phone tree" and "voice menu" describe what the caller experiences: a voice listing options and a keypress (or spoken word) to choose one. They say nothing about what sits behind the menu, which can be a two-option office line or the front of a bank's IVR.

The State of Missouri's IVR guideline shows how loosely the words travel together: it defines IVR as a system that lets a person "select an option from a voice menu and otherwise interface with a computer system" ([Missouri Office of Administration, 2006](#)). By that definition, a plain phone tree is a kind of IVR. So "IVR" on a quote does not, alone, tell you whether you are buying something simple or complex.

Auto attendant: routing by caller choice

Microsoft's documentation gives the clearest working definition from a major vendor: "The primary purpose of an auto attendant is to direct a caller to an appropriate person or department based on the caller's input to the provided menu options" ([Microsoft Learn](#)). In Microsoft's product, destinations can be specific people, call queues, external phone numbers, other auto attendants, or voicemail. The same page notes that routing can differ for business hours, after hours and holidays, and that menu prompts can be text-to-speech or an uploaded recording.

The essential feature is that **the caller makes the routing decision** by choosing from a fixed list. Larger systems add a dial-by-name directory and an operator option (Microsoft offers both), but the system does not answer the caller's question itself.

Synonyms you will see:

- **Automated attendant:** the same thing, longer form.
- **Electronic receptionist / virtual receptionist / digital receptionist:** marketing terms for an auto attendant. Be careful: some companies also sell live, remote human answering under "virtual receptionist". Ask whether a person or software answers.
- **Standard automatique:** the French term in Microsoft's French documentation ([Microsoft Learn, French](#)), useful if you buy service in Quebec.

IVR: when the system also collects and uses data

In engineering usage, IVR is broader. RFC 5552, an IETF standards-track document from 2009, describes VoiceXML media servers controlled by an application server "specialized in providing Interactive Voice Response (IVR) services" ([RFC 5552](#)). VoiceXML itself, a W3C Recommendation since 2004, is "designed for creating audio dialogs that feature synthesized speech, digitized audio, recognition of spoken and DTMF key input" ([W3C VoiceXML 2.0](#)). DTMF is the tone a keypad press sends.

The building block that separates an IVR from a simple menu is what RFC 4240 calls "prompt and collect": the server prompts the caller for information and collects it, for example playing "Please enter your pass code" and then "collecting a string of digits" ([RFC 4240](#)). Once a system collects an account number, it can check it against a database, read back a balance or take a payment. That is the territory people mean when they say "a real IVR".

Note that a phone menu is a subset of this: VoiceXML even has a menu element that "presents the user with a choice of options and then transitions to another dialog based on that choice" ([W3C VoiceXML 2.0](#)). That is why the common rule of thumb is that every IVR contains an auto attendant, but not every auto attendant is an IVR.

Auto attendant vs call queue vs hunt group

These get bundled together on price sheets but solve different problems.

Call queue. Microsoft describes a call queue as "analogous to a waiting room in a physical building": callers wait on hold while calls are routed to representatives ([Microsoft Learn](#)). Microsoft also notes that call queues don't provide separate routing for off hours and holidays and recommends putting an auto attendant in front of them. A queue is for when calls outnumber the people answering.

Hunt group / ring group. One number rings a set of phones. ATIS defines "rotary hunting" as hunting in which all numbers in a hunt group "are selected in a prescribed order" ([ATIS](#)). Vendors describe the same idea as sequential or serial ringing, and offer the alternative of ringing everyone at once.

A vocabulary trap: in Microsoft's call queue settings, "**attendant routing**" means ringing all representatives at the same time, while "**serial routing**" rings them one by one in a set order ([Microsoft Learn, Call Queue setup](#)). "Attendant" there has nothing to do with a menu.

Our article on [call queues, ring groups and auto attendants](#) goes deeper on which a small team needs.

Where AI receptionists differ

The newest category replaces the fixed menu with conversation. Microsoft describes its Teams Phone Agent as extending auto attendants "with AI-driven, human-like conversations that screen calls, answer questions, manage appointments, and route callers without fixed menus"; it lists the product as generally available from September 30, 2026 ([Microsoft Learn](#)).

"Without fixed menus" is a usable dividing line. With an auto attendant, you write the options and the caller picks one. With an AI receptionist, the caller says what they want and software interprets it, answers from a knowledge source, or transfers. That raises different questions: what it says when wrong, what it records, how you review it.

Side-by-side comparison

	Phone tree / auto attendant	IVR (self-service)	Call queue	Hunt / ring group	AI receptionist
Caller input	Keypad (sometimes voice)	Keypad and/or speech, plus data such as account numbers	None, or a callback request	None	Free speech
Who decides the destination	Caller, from a fixed list	Caller and application logic	System, by routing method	System, by ring order	Software interprets the request
Looks up or changes data	No	Yes	No	No	Often
Callers wait on hold	No	Sometimes	Yes, by design	No	Sometimes
Hours-based routing	Common	Common	Not in Microsoft's queues	Varies	Varies
Typical user	Offices of any size	Banks, utilities, government	Sales and support teams	Small teams sharing one number	Businesses automating FAQs and bookings

What a 2-10 person business usually needs

Most small teams need the left-hand column plus a ring group: a short menu, each option ringing the right person's phone (or a few people in turn), and voicemail when no one picks up. You rarely need data dips, hold queues or agent routing until several people answer the same type of call all day.

Questions to ask any vendor, whatever word they use:

- [] Does the system answer and route only, or does it collect and look up information?
- [] How many menu options, and how many levels?

- [] When an option is chosen, does it ring one phone, several in order, or several at once?
- [] What happens if no one answers: voicemail, a message, or a queue?
- [] Are prompts recorded audio, text-to-speech, or both?
- [] Is there separate routing for closed hours and holidays?
- [] Do callers ever wait on hold? If so, for how long, and what do they hear?
- [] If AI is involved, what does it say, what does it record, and can you review it?

Our [glossary](#) defines the remaining jargon you may meet on a quote.

FAQ

Is an auto attendant the same as an IVR?

In common usage, an auto attendant is the routing part only, and an IVR can also collect and act on information. Some organizations, such as the Missouri guideline cited above, use "IVR" for any voice menu, so check what the system does rather than trusting the label.

Is an auto attendant the same as a receptionist?

No. It replaces the "which person do you need?" part of a receptionist's job. It does not answer questions, take detailed messages beyond voicemail, or make judgment calls. AI receptionists try to cover more of that; menu-based attendants do not.

Does an IVR cost more than an auto attendant?

The label alone doesn't set the price. What adds cost is the work behind self-service: connecting the system to your data, designing the dialogs and testing them. Compare quotes against the checklist above rather than by product name.

What is the difference between a phone tree and an auto attendant?

Mostly perspective. "Phone tree" describes the menu the caller hears; "auto attendant" describes the system that plays it and routes the call.

Auto Attendant is a menu-based auto attendant of this simple kind: up to seven options, each ringing up to three phones in turn, with no call queues.

Source links

Links cited in this article, in order of first appearance. Full addresses are provided for readers using extracted text.

1. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/phone-tree-guidelines>
2. <https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc5552>
3. <https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoftteams/aa-cq-plan-overview>
4. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-47/part-7/section-7.3>
5. <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-26-190A1.txt>

6. <https://glossary.atis.org/glossary/attendant-position>
7. <https://glossary.atis.org/glossary/ivr>
8. <https://oa.mo.gov/sites/default/files/CC-Access-InteractiveVoiceRecognition-IVR-Guidelines112806.pdf>
9. <https://learn.microsoft.com/fr-fr/microsoftteams/aa-cq-plan-overview>
10. <https://www.w3.org/TR/voicexml20>
11. <https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc4240>
12. <https://glossary.atis.org/glossary/rotary-hunting>
13. <https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoftteams/aa-cq-setup-call-queue>

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About Auto Attendant

Auto Attendant gives a small business one phone number and a recorded menu that sends each caller to the right person. The call rings the mobile that person already carries, using their normal dialler and their normal mobile plan. Pricing is a single flat monthly fee for the whole company rather than a charge for each user, and there is no app, desk phone or hardware to install.

One number, one menu, the phones you already own

A caller dials the business number, hears a short greeting and chooses an option. Each option can ring one mobile, ring several at once so whoever is free answers first, or try people one after another in a set order. There is no limit on how many people sit on the receiving end, because nobody is billed per seat. Setup is done by the owner in a few minutes: pick a number, write the greeting, and point each option at a mobile.

What it deliberately is not

An auto attendant routes a call; it does not answer one. Nobody at Auto Attendant speaks to callers, and no AI stands in for a receptionist. A business that wants its calls handled, messages taken and appointments booked wants an answering service, which is a different product at a different price. A business that needs call recording, queues, agent dashboards or CRM integration wants a contact centre platform. Auto Attendant is for the case where the call should simply reach the right pocket.

Keeping personal numbers off the internet

The business number is the only number a caller ever sees. Personal mobile numbers are never displayed and never given out, which is what lets an owner put a number on a website, an invoice, a van or a Google Business Profile without handing a personal line to everyone who finds it. An existing advertised number can be ported across and kept, and the old line keeps working while the port is in progress.

Work with Auto Attendant

Visit [Auto Attendant](#) to see [how it works](#), [how it compares](#) to a personal mobile, Google Voice and a full phone platform, and the current [pricing](#).

Telephone number portability, emergency calling and caller-ID rules differ by country and change over time. Articles published here describe general practice and cite primary regulator and carrier sources; they are not a guarantee of any timeline, and they are not legal or regulatory advice for a specific business.

Website: <https://autoattendant.io>

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