Auto Attendant

AUTO ATTENDANT / RESEARCH & PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

Vanity Phone Numbers: How They Work and When to Get One

> 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.

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The short answer

A vanity number is a phone number whose digits spell a word, name or acronym on the keypad. The FCC's own examples are 1-800-FLOWERS and 1-888-NEW-CARS (FCC). The phone network never sees the letters. A caller who dials 1-800-FLOWERS is really dialing 1-800-356-9377; the word is a printing convention layered over the digits.

- **The letter layout is standardized** (ITU-T E.161), and only the seven digits after the area code can carry a word.
- **Toll-free vanity numbers** come from one shared registry, mostly first-come, first-served through a Responsible Organization (RespOrg). US rules prohibit hoarding and brokering them.
- **Local vanity numbers** depend on what a provider has in inventory. There is no central search.
- **They pay off** when people must remember a number without writing it down: radio, billboards, truck wraps. They matter much less when callers tap a number on a screen.

This is educational information as of October 2026, not legal advice.

How the letters map to the keypad

The mapping comes from ITU-T Recommendation E.161 (02/2001), "Arrangement of digits, letters and symbols on telephones and other devices that can be used for gaining access to a telephone network", which the ITU lists as in force (ITU-T E.161). Section 2.2 gives the letter-to-digit relationship, and section 3.1.1 says push-button keypads use the same one:

Key	Letters
1	none
2	A B C

Key	Letters
3	D E F
4	G H I
5	J K L
6	M N O
7	P Q R S
8	T U V
9	W X Y Z
0	none (on North American keypads, 0 is associated with "operator")

Q sits on 7 and Z on 9, so every letter has a key (E.161 PDF). The standard also says allocating mnemonics "is a national matter" (section 1.1), and recommends that subscribers with mnemonic numbers also show the number in digits (section 1.3). That second point is still good advice.

A worked example

This site's own line is (510) 288-6288. Map AUTO-ATT through the table: A=2, U=8, T=8, O=6, A=2, T=8, T=8. That gives 288-6288, so the line can be printed as (510) AUTO-ATT.

The example shows two things worth knowing:

- **The word does not have to line up with the 3-4 split.** "AUTO" covers the three-digit exchange plus the first digit of the last four. Callers don't care where the hyphen goes, as long as the letters produce the right digits.
- **One set of digits spells many strings.** 288 is also BUT and CUT. You choose which string to print.

Why only seven characters count

The North American Numbering Plan (NANP), shared by the US and Canada, uses ten-digit numbers: "a three-digit Numbering Plan Area (NPA) code, commonly called an area code, followed by a seven-digit local number", written NXX-NXX-XXXX, "where N is any digit from 2 through 9 and X is any digit from 0 through 9" (NANPA).

Consequences for vanity numbers:

- **Seven letters is the maximum.** You choose the area code (or a toll-free code such as 800), and the word replaces the seven digits after it.
- **Longer words are decoration.** A hypothetical 1-800-PLUMBERS has eight letters. The first seven (PLUMBER) give 758-6237. The final S is not part of the number. Some advertisers print extra letters anyway. If you do, you are counting on callers to stop at the right place or on their phone to cope with an extra digit, and you can't control either.

- **0 and 1 cannot be spelled.** Neither key carries letters, so a number with a 0 or 1 in its last seven digits can only be partly spelled. A number ending in 2601 can never be a four-letter word. Many "almost" vanity numbers fail on this point.
- **Short words are easier to find.** A four-letter word in the last four digits is far more available than a full seven-letter word.

Toll-free vanity numbers: how they are assigned

Toll-free numbers do not belong to a phone company the way local numbers do. Per the FCC, "the FCC assigns most toll free numbers on a first-come, first-served basis," subscribers choose "Responsible Organizations" or "RespOrgs" to reserve numbers for them, and "Somos, Inc., administrator of the toll free number database, certifies RespOrgs" (FCC). The rule behind it, 47 CFR 52.111, allows assignment by competitive bidding, first-come first-served, another method, or a combination (47 CFR 52.111).

Canada uses the same system. Somos says that "in 1994, Canada joined the USA in a common TFNRegistry" (Somos support), so US and Canadian businesses compete for the same pool of toll-free numbers.

How to check one

1. **Search Somos.** The Somos "Find a Toll-Free Number" page lets you pick any of the 800, 888, 877, 866, 855, 844 and 833 codes and "enter any combination of seven (7) numbers and letters" (Somos). The tool converts letters to digits for you.
2. **Pick a RespOrg.** Somos says anyone who wants a toll-free number "should contact a Responsible Organization (Resp Org) (also known as a Toll-Free Service Provider)" and that available numbers "can be reserved on a first-come, first-served basis" (Somos support). The FCC notes that "many RespOrgs also provide toll free service."
3. **Have it reserved, then activated.** Under 47 CFR 52.103(b), a toll-free number may stay in reserved status for up to 45 days, with "no extension of the reservation period" (47 CFR 52.103). A search result showing a number as available is not a hold. Until a RespOrg reserves it, someone else can take it.
4. **Do not wait on a recently disconnected number.** A disconnected toll-free number must stay in disconnect or transitional status for "no less than 45 days and for no more than 4 months" before it returns to the spare pool (52.103(d)). If the word you want was just released, expect to wait.

Remember that the codes are not interchangeable. The FCC notes that "dialing a number using a 1-800 prefix would reach a different recipient than dialing that number using a 1-888 prefix" (FCC). If you get 1-833-YOURWORD while someone else holds 1-800-YOURWORD, some callers will reach the other business by habit. Check who holds the same word under the other codes before you commit.

How the different codes behave and when toll-free makes sense at all is covered in Local or toll-free?.

The rules you cannot ignore: warehousing, hoarding and brokering

Good words have resale value, and the FCC's toll-free rules exist partly to prevent speculation. As of October 2026, the US federal rules in 47 CFR Part 52, Subpart D say:

- **Warehousing (47 CFR 52.105)** is a RespOrg reserving toll-free numbers "without having an actual toll free subscriber for whom those numbers are being reserved." RespOrgs "shall not warehouse toll free numbers," and those that do "will be subject to penalties" (47 CFR 52.105).
- **Hoarding (47 CFR 52.107)** is a subscriber acquiring "more toll free numbers than the toll free subscriber intends to use." It "also includes number brokering, which is the selling of a toll free number by a private entity for a fee," and no one may acquire a toll-free number in order to sell it for a fee. Routing multiple toll-free numbers to one subscriber creates "a rebuttable presumption" of hoarding or brokering (47 CFR 52.107).
- **Reservation caps (47 CFR 52.109)** limit how many numbers a RespOrg may hold in reserve at once (47 CFR 52.109).

There is one exception. Both 52.105(f) and 52.107(c) exclude toll-free numbers "assigned via competitive bidding." That covers the 833 Auction, which the FCC calls "an experiment to determine how to use competitive bidding to most effectively assign toll free numbers" (FCC). Bidding began on December 17, 2019, and the FCC announced on December 20, 2019 that Somos, acting as auctioneer, had released the list of winning bidders (Public Notice DA 19-1315, AU Docket No. 19-101) (FCC DA 19-1315).

If someone offers to sell you a toll-free vanity number: unless it was assigned through competitive bidding, the FCC treats selling a toll-free number for a fee as prohibited brokering. Ask how the number was assigned, and get the answer in writing.

These are US federal rules for toll-free numbers only. Canadian businesses use the same registry. Scope limit: we could not load a primary CRTC source on toll-free hoarding or brokering in Canada, so this article states no Canadian rule; ask your provider which terms apply.

Local vanity numbers

No Somos exists for local numbers. Each provider holds blocks of numbers in particular area codes and exchanges, and what you can choose from is whatever that provider has available today. In practice:

- **Search inside the provider.** Some providers expose pattern search. Twilio's API, for example, has a "Contains" parameter that accepts digits and letters, with a documented letter-pattern search (Twilio docs). Twilio says only that it "seeks to keep a wide variety of phone numbers in stock," so a result is a snapshot, not a guarantee.
- **Try several providers and exchanges.** A word that isn't available in one provider's inventory may be available with another, or in an overlay area code covering the same city. Choosing your area code covers how overlays work.
- **Expect partial words.** A full seven-letter word in a specific area code is rare. A four-letter word at the end, or a memorable digit pattern, is far more realistic.
- **Ask about price before you pick.** There is no standard price for a particular local number. If a provider charges extra for one, get the monthly cost in writing before you commit.

Local vanity, toll-free vanity or memorable digits

A number doesn't need letters to be easy to remember. Repeated digits, such as 288-6288 (288, then 6, then 288 again), can be easier to say aloud than a word callers must spell.

	Local vanity	Toll-free vanity	Memorable digits
Example	(510) AUTO-ATT	1-800-FLOWERS	(510) 288-6288
Where it comes from	A provider's inventory in one area code	The shared toll-free registry, via a RespOrg	A provider's inventory
How to search	Inside each provider, if it offers pattern search	Somos search, then a RespOrg	Inside each provider
Signals	"We're local"	"We serve the whole country"	Nothing in particular
Who pays for the call	The caller's normal plan	You pay; mobile callers may still use airtime unless on unlimited plans (FCC)	The caller's normal plan
Specific federal rules	No toll-free rules apply	Warehousing, hoarding and brokering bans (47 CFR 52.105-52.107)	No toll-free rules apply
Main risk	Word unavailable in your area code	Someone holds the same word under another code	Few such patterns in stock
Works when spoken	Only if the word is easy to spell	Only if the word is easy to spell	Yes, if the pattern is short

Getting the details right: websites, print and voice

Most vanity numbers fail on presentation, not availability.

- **Print the digits too.** E.161 recommends showing the number in digits alongside the mnemonic. On a website, put the digits first or right next to the word: (510) 288-6288 (AUTO-ATT).
- **Click-to-call links need digits.** The `tel:` URI format (RFC 3966) allows only digits and the separators `- . ( )` in a number (RFC 3966). Use `tel:+15102886288`, never the word. Most mobile visitors will tap, not dial.
- **Watch O/0 and I/1.** A caller reading "BOOK" may press 0 instead of 6 for each O. "I" is on 4, and a caller may reach for 1. Words without O and I are safer. If yours has them, print the digits prominently.
- **Do not print extra letters** unless you have tested the result on landlines and mobiles and accept the ambiguity.
- **Make radio spelling unambiguous.** Spoken letters blur together (B, D, P, T, V), and homophones ("4" or "FOR", "2" or "TO") trip people up. Say the word once, then the digits: "Call 1-800-FLOWERS, that's 1-800-356-9377."
- **Say the digits in your greeting.** If your phone menu, closed-hours message or voicemail greeting mentions your number ("you can also reach us at..."), use the digits, not the word. A caller holding the phone to their ear can't decode letters.

When a vanity number is worth it, and when it isn't

Worth pursuing when your ads are heard or seen in passing (radio, podcasts, billboards, transit, truck wraps, yard signs), the number is the call to action of a long-running campaign, and you can get a short, unambiguous word that matches what you do.

Probably not worth it when most calls come from search results, map listings or your website, where people tap the number; when customers and directories already know your current number (keep it, and port it if you change providers); or when the only available version uses a misspelling or collides with someone else's 800 number.

Checklist before you commit

1. Convert the word with the E.161 table and confirm the seven digits yourself.
2. Check for 0 and 1 in the digits, and O and I in the word.
3. Toll-free: search Somos across all seven codes and see who holds the word on the other codes.
4. Local: search several providers and overlay area codes; get any extra charge in writing.
5. If anyone wants a fee to "sell" you a toll-free number, ask whether it was assigned by competitive bidding. If not, walk away.
6. Reserve promptly; toll-free reservations last at most 45 days.
7. Dial it by letters from a landline and a mobile before printing anything.
8. Publish digits next to the word, with a digits-only `tel:` link.
9. Read your radio script to someone who hasn't seen it and have them dial what they heard.

FAQ

Can I get a local vanity number in Canada? Yes, if a provider has a matching number in inventory. Canada and the US share the NANP format and the same keypad standard. Availability depends on the provider and the area code, so search every code that serves your city.

Is 1-800 better than 1-833? They work the same way, but they are different numbers. The FCC notes that 800 and 888 versions of the same digits reach different recipients. A vanity word on a newer code can lose calls to whoever holds it on 800.

Can I buy a vanity number from its current holder? For toll-free numbers, US rules treat selling a number for a fee as brokering, which 47 CFR 52.107 prohibits except for numbers assigned by competitive bidding, such as those from the 833 Auction. For local numbers, these toll-free rules don't apply. Talk to a lawyer before paying anyone for a number.

Do I keep a vanity number if I change providers? Toll-free numbers are portable: the FCC requires that a subscriber can move the number to a new RespOrg. More on getting and keeping numbers is in How to get a business phone number.

Auto Attendant lets you search the US and Canadian numbers available for a new line by area code, by digits or letters, and for toll-free numbers, and ranks the results by memorability; the number you pick is included in the $29 USD monthly price. It does not sell numbers on their own and cannot obtain a vanity number someone else already holds.

Source links

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

1. https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/what-toll-free-number-and-how-does-it-work
2. https://www.itu.int/rec/T-REC-E.161-200102-I/en
3. https://www.itu.int/rec/dologin_pub.asp?lang=e&id=T-REC-E.161-200102-I!!PDF-E&type=items
4. https://www.nanpa.com/about
5. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-47/part-52/section-52.111
6. https://support.somos.com/hc/en-us/articles/4678239555988-Somos-What-are-Special-Numbers-BRCUD-BRDUP-and-BRRCC
7. https://www.somos.com/find-toll-free-number
8. https://support.somos.com/hc/en-us/articles/7878465815188-How-can-I-Get-a-Toll-Free-Number
9. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-47/part-52/section-52.103
10. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-47/part-52/section-52.105
11. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-47/part-52/section-52.107
12. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-47/part-52/section-52.109
13. https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-19-1315A1.pdf
14. https://www.twilio.com/docs/phone-numbers/api/availablephonenumberlocal-resource
15. https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc3966

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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.

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