Auto Attendant

AUTO ATTENDANT / RESEARCH & PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

Virtual Phone Number: How It Works, Costs and Limits

> 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 · virtual phone number · what is a virtual phone number · virtual business number · voip number vs virtual number

Original article: https://autoattendant.io/articles/virtual-phone-number-how-it-works-limits

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What "virtual phone number" actually means

A virtual phone number is an ordinary 10-digit North American number that is not tied to one physical line or one SIM card. Callers dial it like any other number. The difference is on your side: the number lives with a provider's system on the internet, and that system decides where each call goes, whether to a desk phone, an app, a voicemail box or one or more mobile phones.

"Virtual" is a marketing word, not a legal category. Regulators talk about the technology underneath, which is almost always voice over internet protocol (VoIP). The FCC describes VoIP as technology that converts the voice signal into a digital signal that can travel over the Internet, converted back at the other end when you reach a regular phone number. The same guide notes that some VoIP services only let you call people on the same service, while others let you call any number.

So when a provider sells you a "virtual business number," ask a narrower question: is it a real number on the public telephone network that anyone can dial, and what exactly can it do (receive calls, make calls, send texts)? Those answers matter more than the label.

Virtual, VoIP, landline, mobile: the vocabulary

Term	What it usually means	Tied to a place or device?
Landline	Service delivered to a fixed address over the phone company's network	Yes, a service address
Mobile	Service on a SIM in one handset	Yes, one SIM
VoIP number	A number served over the internet by a VoIP provider	Depends on the service
Virtual number	A VoIP number used mainly to route calls somewhere else (forwarding, menus, apps)	No
Toll-free number	A number callers dial at no charge; the business pays for the inbound calls	No

In practice "virtual number" and "VoIP number" overlap almost completely. The useful distinction is between a number that is a full phone service (you can call out from it, and it carries 911 duties) and a number that only receives calls and passes them on.

How a call to a virtual number is routed

Here is the path of a typical inbound call:

1. A customer dials your number from any phone.
2. The telephone network delivers the call to the provider that holds the number.
3. The provider's software applies your rules: business hours, a greeting, a menu, who to ring and for how long.
4. The call is passed to its destination, for example a staff member's mobile, a softphone app or a voicemail box.

5. If nobody answers, the fallback you chose runs: voicemail, a recorded message, or another person.

Because step 3 is software, you can change routing without touching wiring. You can ring a different person on Tuesdays, add a menu option, or send everything to voicemail during a holiday, all from a web page. That flexibility is the main reason small businesses use virtual numbers.

Location is also flexible. The FCC notes that a VoIP provider may let you select an area code different from the one where you live. A Calgary bookkeeper can hold a Toronto number for Toronto clients; a remote team in three states can share one local number. If you are choosing an area code, see the business phone number area code guide and the area code directory.

Where the numbers come from

Virtual numbers are not a separate pool. They come from the same North American Numbering Plan as every other number. In the US, the FCC's 2015 Report and Order FCC 15-70 set up a process for interconnected VoIP providers to obtain numbers directly from the numbering administrators rather than only through intermediary carriers. Many smaller providers still get their numbers from a wholesale carrier. Either way, a legitimate number works like any other number on the network.

In Canada, the CRTC treats a provider as a local VoIP service provider when it (i) gives customers numbers that conform to the North American Numbering Plan, (ii) provides access to and from the public switched telephone network, and (iii) lets customers make or receive local calls. That page is a summary: the underlying decision, Telecom Decision CRTC 2005-21 (para. 2), says "access to and/or from" the network and "make and/or receive" calls, so the definition alone does not settle whether a receive-only service is covered. The CRTC adds that using VoIP technology does not by itself make a company a local VoIP provider; it has to meet all three criteria.

The legal side: what "interconnected VoIP" brings with it

US rules hang most VoIP obligations on one definition. Under 47 CFR 9.3, an interconnected VoIP service:

- enables real-time, two-way voice communications;
- requires a broadband connection from the user's location;
- requires IP-compatible customer equipment; and
- permits users generally to receive calls from the public telephone network and to place calls to it.

For 911 purposes only, the same section also covers a service that meets the first three points and lets users place calls to the public network, even if it does not receive them.

When a service is interconnected VoIP, several duties follow. According to the FCC's VoIP consumer guide, providers must:

- meet 911 obligations;
- comply with local number portability rules, so you can move the number;
- protect customer calling records;

- contribute to the Universal Service Fund and the Telecommunications Relay Services Fund, and offer 711 relay dialing.

For 911 specifically, the FCC's VoIP and 911 guide says interconnected VoIP providers must provide 911 as a standard feature customers cannot opt out of, obtain the customer's physical location before activation, offer easy ways to update it, and transmit the callback number and registered location with each 911 call.

In Canada, the CRTC's three main duties for local VoIP providers are to provide Basic or Enhanced 9-1-1 service, notify customers of any 9-1-1 limitations, and register with the Commission (as a reseller, or as a competitive local exchange carrier if it owns facilities). Its sample customer notice warns that VoIP 9-1-1 calls may be forwarded to a third-party provider before reaching the emergency centre and that callers must be ready to state their location. The 9-1-1 duties in Decision 2005-21 are about routing "a 9-1-1 call originating from a local VoIP service" (paras. 52 and 68). Canada is also moving to next-generation 9-1-1; as of October 2026 the CRTC's date for retiring the legacy 9-1-1 network is 31 March 2027 (CRTC, Next-generation 9-1-1).

What this means for a buyer: a number that can call out is a phone service with 911 obligations. A number that only receives calls and forwards them to your mobiles is a routing layer. It cannot place a call, so it cannot originate a 911 or 9-1-1 call, and the duties above, which concern emergency calls a customer places, have nothing to route. In the US it also falls outside the interconnected VoIP definition, which requires the ability to place calls. Your emergency calls go out from the mobile or desk phone you actually dial on. Know which one you are buying. This is general information, not legal advice.

Where virtual numbers fall short

Virtual numbers solve routing. They do not solve everything.

911 location. The FCC warns that VoIP 911 calls may not reach the call centre serving your current location, may ring an administrative line that is not staffed after hours, or may arrive without your number or location. If staff carry a softphone app between sites, the registered address can be wrong. The safest habit: dial emergencies from a mobile or a fixed line at the site, and keep any VoIP registered address current.

Power and internet. The FCC says some VoIP services don't work during power outages and the provider may not offer backup power. A virtual number that forwards to mobiles is less exposed, because the number's routing runs in the provider's network rather than on your office router. A desk phone on your office internet still goes dark when the router does.

Directory listings. The FCC notes that VoIP providers may or may not offer directory assistance or white page listings. Most small businesses now rely on their website and maps listing instead, so put the number there.

Texting and verification codes. Texting is a separate feature from voice, and not every virtual number offers it. If you need the number to receive texts or sign-in codes, confirm it in writing before you print it on anything.

Feature gaps. Outbound calling, call recording, call queues and texting are separate features. A number that rings your team does not automatically let staff call customers back from that number. Check each feature you need.

What it costs: the cost drivers

Prices vary too much by provider and plan to quote meaningfully, and they change often. Instead, compare offers on these drivers:

Cost driver	What to ask
Monthly fee	Is it per number, per user, or per "seat"? Does a second number cost extra?
Minutes	Are inbound minutes included? Are forwarded minutes to mobiles counted twice (inbound plus outbound leg)?
Toll-free	Toll-free numbers usually bill the business for inbound minutes; what is the per-minute rate?
Porting	Is there a fee to bring your number in, or to take it out later? The FCC says companies may charge to port, and you can ask for it to be waived.
Regulatory charges and taxes	Are taxes, 911 fees or regulatory recovery charges added on top of the quoted price?
Hardware	Do you need desk phones or adapters, or does it ring existing mobiles?
Contract	Monthly or annual? Any early termination fee?

A quick way to compare two quotes: write down your expected monthly inbound minutes and number of people who need to ring, then price each plan with those numbers and with taxes included.

Can you port a virtual number in or out?

Yes, as a rule. The FCC states that if you stay in the same geographic area you can keep your number when switching providers, and that this can be done between wireline, IP and wireless providers. The same guide says simple ports must be processed in one business day, that you should not cancel the old service before starting the new one, and that once you request service from a new company, the old company cannot refuse to port your number even if you owe a balance or a termination fee (you still owe it).

Two practical cautions:

- Before you sign, confirm the provider gives you the number itself, not a shared or pooled number, and that it will release it to another provider on request.
- Keep the account number and the name on the account exactly as the provider has them. Port requests are matched against those details.

Our guide to how to get a business phone number covers the choice between porting an existing number and taking a new one.

Provider checklist

Use this before you commit to any virtual number:

- [ ] The number is a real US or Canadian number assigned to you alone.
- [ ] You can port it out later; ask for the porting process and any fees in writing.
- [ ] It rings the people you need (mobiles, apps or desk phones), in the order you need.
- [ ] Business hours, holiday closures and after-hours behaviour can be set without calling support.
- [ ] Voicemail goes where your team will see it (email, app) and you know how long messages are kept.
- [ ] You know whether staff can call out from the number, and if so, how 911 and the registered address work.
- [ ] Texting is either included and registered, or you know it is not offered.
- [ ] The total monthly price includes taxes and regulatory charges.
- [ ] For Canada: the provider serves Canadian numbers and, if it offers outbound calling, it describes its 9-1-1 limits as the CRTC requires.
- [ ] You have tested a call from a landline and a mobile on another carrier before printing the number.

FAQ

Is a virtual number the same as a VoIP number? Usually, yes. Virtual numbers almost always run on VoIP. "Virtual" emphasises that the number is not tied to a device; "VoIP" describes the technology.

Is a virtual number legal for a business? Yes. Numbers are assigned from the same numbering plan as any other, and providers that offer interconnected VoIP carry the obligations described above. Using one is no different, legally, from using a landline number.

Will customers know it is a virtual number? Not from the number itself. It looks and dials like any local or toll-free number. What callers notice is how the call is answered.

Does a virtual number work during a power cut? The number keeps answering in the provider's network. Whether a person picks up depends on the destination: a mobile on battery will still ring; a desk phone on a powered-down office router will not.

Can I keep my virtual number if I change providers? In most cases, yes, under the portability rules above. Confirm the provider does not hold the number under its own account in a way that blocks a port.

Can I use a virtual number for texts and bank verification codes? Only if the provider supports texting on that number. Check before relying on it.

Auto Attendant offers US and Canadian numbers with a simple menu that rings your team's phones, at $29 USD per line per month.

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Source links

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

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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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