

Inbound Phone Calls are the Digital Marketer's New Playground



By KYLE RIORDAN

Every day software eats a bit more of the world, and it never ceases to amaze me how profoundly transformed and re-invented are the things that software eats.

I recently became aware that phone calls are being eaten by software in a rather spectacular way. Without going too deeply into the long explanation, suffice it to say that what we think of as a “phone call” (a live, synchronous dialogue between two or more parties) is going to evolve very dramatically, and very quickly in the next few years.



There has been an underlying shift in technological enablement, which was driven by the continuing acceleration of phone calls happening in the context of software applications (like calling your Uber driver from the mobile app). And this is but one familiar example. Companies of all sizes are “building phone calls” into new areas of customer engagement. They are also doing very inventive new things where phone calls are already an important touchpoint.

The specific customer touchpoint I want to focus on here is the inbound call, typically to a sales line. The number you put at the bottom of your company’s website. A number you might put in an ad, on a billboard, in print, or in an Adwords campaign. A number from which you expect new business and revenue.

This advent of full programmatic control over the phone call is creating a new playground of data-driven possibility for agile marketers. We have only very recently gained the ability to design a custom experience for our inbound business callers, and to iterate, measure and compare results, as we already enjoy in other digital marketing areas.

This is an important new opportunity for any company that puts phone numbers out into the world for their customers to call.

Inbound phone calls are an interesting place to think experimentally as a marketer. Because the customer is calling you, they are full of energy and intent. Accordingly, you want to conduct an inbound caller (particularly to a sales line) to the best business outcome, on a 24/7 basis.

But you also want to take advantage of the opportunity to differentiate your company with an unexpectedly clever, effective, intuitive, or relevant user experience. In the realm of software, you can think creatively beyond the usual constraints and conventions evident in most inbound business caller user experiences. The inbound business call now becomes a wholly digital experience that you can design and build to perfectly suit the needs of your business, just like you already can with your website or app.

It is particularly exciting that these new digital powers over inbound calls are available to businesses of all sizes both easily and inexpensively. This is a radical disruption of the current state, where only big companies have the ability to invest in the meaningful customization of the inbound caller experience. And these experiences with big-company phone systems, as we can all attest, are most often very frustrating, and never inspirational or memorable. As a growth marketer, you can forget about experimentation or measurement in this space, as well.

With the inbound business call we now have the three great, basic powers innate to digital marketing: i) design freely, ii) iterate and release frequently, and iii) measure results and improve.

So how do you create a custom inbound business caller experience? A developer with even moderate skills can create a customized inbound caller application for your business in a single weekend. This fairly new power comes from two things: i) the easy availability of virtual local phone numbers that you can rent for very little money, and ii) a comprehensively powerful Voice API, which gives developers the means to easily build a unique phone call experience from the ground up, just as if it were an app or a website.

It really is as simple as: i) rent some virtual numbers, ii) write some code, iii) put the numbers in the world (receive some calls), iv) measure the results.

Fun in the Inbound Call Digital Playground

The following are some examples of clever things you can do with inbound calls to delight your callers and boost your business results:

1. **Custom IVR Menu** — A great place to begin is to offer your callers a simple [interactive voice response](#) (IVR) menu where you can present various options and paths forward. The options you provide can reflect context from the caller (like what device type they are calling from) as well as external variables like time-of-day. Businesses can make the most of those off-hour calls by engaging with callers in a smart menu system, and leading them to a good outcome, even if no one is available to speak or take a message.
2. **Call Tracking for Paid Ads** — You can use unique [virtual local numbers](#) like Bitly links in your advertising campaigns. If you advertise phone numbers in your Adwords or Facebook campaigns, the ability to get granular performance and conversion data by phone number opens up a whole new dimension of optimization for you to geek out in.
3. **Custom Experience for Mobile** — Customize the caller experience based on the type of number they are calling from. Using a [number insights API](#) in your application, you can learn the device type, or if they are roaming. You can then use this information dynamically to customize the caller experience, by (for example) offering them the ability to receive a text message from you later, if you detect they are calling from a mobile number.
4. **Custom Call Routing and Business Rules** — Easily create (and update) rules for routing inbound callers to other numbers or pre-recorded messages based on time of day and a host of other variables. You can not only create complex forwarding rules based on dynamic business conditions, but you can also offer contextually aware menus and options that take into account the caller's context. Software is absolutely the most convenient place for this kind of customization to live, and it's never been easier to build your own application for this.
5. **Call Tracking for Direct Mail Campaigns** — Use [virtual numbers](#) in your direct (physical) mail marketing campaigns. Direct mail is still a very important channel for lots of businesses, like financial services. If you're going to send pieces of mail with phone numbers on them, you may as well be insanely data-driven about it. You can print unique virtual numbers on the mail pieces based on targeting and segmentation to bring a whole new dimension of insights to these campaigns.
6. **Re-Engagement Campaigns** — Use phone calls to re-engage with customers you don't normally reach via that channel. If you have a large database of email addresses, you can create a re-engagement email campaign with a CTA to a phone call. You will have fine granularity over tracking the results as well as the ability to deliver customized experiences based on your customer variables.
7. **Mobile App Promotion** — [Promote your mobile app](#) to mobile inbound callers. This is a bonafide growth hack. Your custom inbound phone call application can detect if the caller is using a mobile phone. If your business has a mobile app, you can easily add a menu-driven option or just add the message and prompt before the call ends to let the caller get a text message with the appropriate link (to your iOS or Android store) for them to install your app later.
8. **800 Number Replacement** — If you're paying for 800 numbers that you promote with marketing, just stop it now and [replace them](#) immediately with local virtual numbers. Smart is the new toll-free. Virtual numbers are cheaper and you can do amazing things with them, as you can see from this list.
9. **Call Whispering** — Identify inbound calls by their campaign as they come in. It can be very useful, particularly if you have agents taking calls, to know that a call is coming in from a specific campaign. You can do this easily by building [call whispering](#) into your inbound call application. An example would be you have agents handling inbound requests for many different products. With call whispering (which could be enacted as a simple display built into a desktop application or CRM) they could know which campaign they were calling about, and could answer the call in a very precise manner.
10. **Surveys and Forms via Phone Call** — If you want to start to get a little fancy, you can take simple information requests autonomously by phone with a combination of a custom IVR menu, recording the caller's responses, performing speech-to-text in the background, and then storing that data for later retrieval in a CRM or database. Speech that you capture and convert to text in this way can be analyzed for sentiment and content, as well, opening up totally new dimensions for insight about your customers.
11. **Let an AI answer the Call** — For those who really want to stretch the envelope, consider letting your inbound callers engage with a live AI agent of your own making. This is absolutely the future of inbound business calls, and you can start playing in this territory right now. Here's a story about some recent work some people I know did to bring [IBM Watson](#) into interactive phone call experiences.

UPDATE: (8/3/17) – Inbound Call Tracking with Mixpanel and the Nexmo Voice API

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Message (optional)	

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