

COLUMNS

## 3 ways to reinvent the phone number

April 25, 2016



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Conventional wisdom is that the phone number is on the way out. When Facebook rolled out its predictions for what 2016 would hold, one of its key arguments was for the disappearance of the phone number as messaging applications continue to grow.

Adding weight to this assumption is the prevailing belief that young people hate making phone calls.

However, these assumptions belie the ways that small and midsize businesses are rethinking the phone number, and how it can be used. Here are three ways:

### 1. Local uses

Ninety-three percent of consumers prefer small and local businesses, half of whom do so because they believe in investing in and supporting the community.

As businesses expand into new markets, they are also acquiring local phone numbers. This is not meant to be illusory everyone from paint contractors and service providers use local numbers to create separate lines with separate messaging systems.

Businesses also use extra phone numbers to provide employees with dedicated numbers without having to pay for new hardware.

By allowing small businesses to tap local markets and lowering the costs of communicating with employees, the phone number is playing a key role in helping small and midsize companies grow.

### 2. Always available

At a time where employees are expected to be available at all times, efficiency is more important than ever for small businesses, which has naturally led to an increase in mobile behavior.

In today's world, your communication workflow is every bit as important as having a calendar to schedule your day.

In the past, however, the only real option anyone had was to not answer the phone. You still had to pick it up, ascertain who wanted your time, and then decide whether to give it to them.

Almost every facet of our day-to-day is handled through the phone.

Our personal network of applications and software allows us to compartmentalize, and have more control on the way we receive information.

Phone numbers allow us to determine the terms on which people have access to us. You can decide that 6:30 p.m. is dinnertime, and the phone only rings if it is an emergency everyone else goes to voicemail so dinnertime is quiet.

At the same time, you have full access to texts and calls, so every interaction gets segmented at the point you initiate calls or share contact details.

With so many things and pieces of information competing for our attention 24/7, phone numbers provide crucial context for work-life balance that lets us categorize our day and who can reach us when.

### 3. Identity protection

There is a reason why most communication, social media and ecommerce sites encourage two-point authentication, often using a phone number.

Email passwords are predictable and easy to hack. As the tools for hackers become more sophisticated, and more bad actors get their hands on Internet connections, it is going to become more important than ever to have an added layer of protection for our online identities.

Facebook Messenger obviously has a lot to gain from notion that the phone number is over, as a Facebook hopes its accounts will one day become a replacement, allowing anyone to reach us at any time just by knowing our name.

THERE ARE MYRIAD ways that small businesses are innovating with phone numbers to improve efficiency, keep employees and expansions organized, and to help consumers manage their communications.

The phone number is not ending anytime soon, if anything we are just beginning to unlock its potential.

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