



## Voice Control May Be Next Hot Feature

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By Roger Cheng

NEW YORK (Dow Jones)--Consumers may soon be talking to their cellphones, and not just through them.

Voice dialing is a common - if sporadically used - feature found on cellphones. You push a button, say "Call Mom" at the prompt, and your handset does the rest. It's never been a cornerstone feature of any handset and rarely used as a selling point. But many are banking on the feature to make a splash this year.

Telecommunications giant [AT&T Inc.](#) (T) and voice-recognition software provider Nuance Inc. (NUAN) are among the players looking at the area. Both have features that take advantage of voice capabilities in new ways, which could be seen by consumers in the coming months.

[AT&T](#) wants to integrate voice commands into global positioning system driving directions and local searches on its cellphones, as well as with its U-Verse television service.

"One of the things we see is speech recognition presenting a unique opportunity in the space of mobile devices," said Chuck Kalmanek, vice president of networking and services research at [AT&T](#) Labs. "Interactions are often hampered by the fact that devices are getting smaller, but my fingers don't get smaller. For a large class of applications, it's much easier to use speech."

[AT&T](#) plans to offer the services as add-on features to complement its wireless or home offerings, but pricing has yet to be determined.

Nuance, meanwhile, recently launched a new software platform called Nuance Voice Control 2.0, which better integrates the existing features on the phone with voice. There is rising interest among the carriers and handset makers to get these services to consumers, said Mike Thompson, senior vice president and general manager of Nuance's mobile division. He added that Nuance is in active discussions with most of the major players and expects some features to hit the market later this year.

### Back And Forth

Many features, including mobile Web search and navigation, lend themselves to voice commands. That's particularly the case for drivers who need to use their cellphone when both hands are on the steering wheel.

[AT&T](#) has high hopes for voice commands this year. The company plans to apply voice commands to local search, tapping into the local businesses listed under its Yellow Pages directories unit.

"It's a much more natural way for the user to interact with that experience than by typing in text," Kalmanek said.

In addition to normal search results displayed on the cellphone, [AT&T](#) is working on a text-to-voice option, so the handset will read out the message or search result to the person. That's particularly handy when on the road.

It's a natural extension to the voicemail-to-text services offered by the likes of [SpinVox Ltd.](#) and PhoneTag Inc.

Interest already exists. A quarter of the people surveyed by Yankee Group in a study last year said they would be willing to pay an additional \$5 a month for voice-to-text transcription service. The study suggested that most of the interest would come from states that have banned text messaging and cellphone calls while driving.

#### Total Control

Nuance, meanwhile, believes the comprehensive capabilities enabled by its software will be attractive to consumers. With one push of a button, a person will be able to make a call, find a song and play it, run a search for the local coffee shop or dictate a message.

"The totality of the offering all integrated into one button push from the idle screen has never been done before," Thompson said.

Nuance's secret sauce comes from its ability to tie together voice recognition software that works both on the phone and through the network, which Thompson said has never been done together before.

Many phones have a voice-recognition system built into the device, which allows you to comb through the data on the cellphone, such as an address book. It's more complicated, though, to run network-based tasks such as a mobile Web search because that voice must be recognized not just by the phone, but the underlying network connecting it.

Some smartphones are able to take advantage of some the features now, but it's a cumbersome process that requires a person to download a program. New phones that ship with the new Nuance Voice Control platform will have these features automatically ready to go.

"The whole experience is seamless," Thompson said.

#### A Voice In The Home

Because couch potatoes can't resist the latest technological convenience, [AT&T](#) wants to bring voice control into the home as well.

Eventually, users will be able to search through the hundreds of channels of live and video on demand content available on U-Verse by simply speaking into a TV remote control with a built-in microphone.

For example, a person can say "basketball games on Thursday" to get a list of match-ups available that day and on which channels.

Likewise, consumers will eventually be able to say their favorite programs to their cellphone to activate the digital video recorder at home.

It's unclear when these features will hit the market, but Kalmanek said these projects are well past the drawing board. The remote with microphone, for example, is already in the prototype stage.

For now, voice controls remains a niche business. Thompson acknowledged the penetration rate is low, but once people start using it, they're hooked. One of the top 10 complaints on the [Apple Inc.](#) (AAPL) iPhone is the lack of voice commands, he said.