

*This was a blog post for a telecommunications company (Allworx) for whom I did freelance work. This is just an excerpt of the whole post.*

If you've ever called a business - whether a medical office or a cable company - and heard a message like this: "Thank you for calling XYZ. If you know your party's extension, you may dial it at any time. For the ABC department, press 1...", you've dealt with an auto attendant (A.A.). An auto attendant is simply a digital or automated receptionist, a system that automatically routes inbound calls for a business. An Automated Attendant system is a tremendous asset for almost any type of business. It allows a quick and efficient transfer of inbound calls throughout a company, without having to rely on any human interface. It also ensures that all inbound calls are answered in some form - whether that's by a specific department, a specific person, an operator, or a voice mailbox - instead of the phone repeatedly ringing until the caller hangs up. It can be as simple as each digit dialed going to a specific phone extension, or as complex as each digit directing callers to a submenu of departments, dial-by-name directory, message mailboxes and more.

For some businesses, an A.A. can be a helpful cost-savings measure. It allows the business to route all calls digitally instead of being answered by a live receptionist, so the company is investing in a one-time phone system set-up versus an ongoing salary of an employee. The A.A. not only ensures that each and every call gets to a specific destination; it also means the phone system can operate effectively 24/7, even when no one is in the office. Installing an A.A. is a proactive step to help ensure that you never have a frustrated customer or client on the line listening to the phone endlessly ring. For any small- to-medium business, each customer and client is essential, so the last thing you want is to leave them with a bad impression or negative experience in trying to contact you.

Many companies, however, still prefer to have that "human touch" when customers or clients call. They feel it's ideal if their callers hear a real, live person on the line instead of a recording. This is still entirely possible with an Automated Attendant system; in fact, many small-to-medium businesses that have an A.A. system also continue to use a human receptionist. In these cases, the A.A. acts as a valuable backup system, answering and routing inbound calls when the receptionist is busy on another line, helping a customer in person, or has briefly stepped away from the desk.

One of the best features of an Auto Attendant is its flexibility. Any business that installs an A.A. can customize the features to best serve the company and its customers. For

some, that might mean it answers the phone first, allowing the inbound caller to choose from a list of options to route the call to the right place. Some may use it so that it rings phones in multiple areas or departments at once, ensuring that the call will get picked up by the first available person. For others, it may mean that the default is a person answering the phone first; but if no one is available, the system then automatically routes the call to a voicemail box, a different line, or the operator. It all depends on the company's end goal for its callers; but in each case, it gives the company far more options to ensure their customers have a reliable way to get in touch via telephone.