Finally, iSpeak to iPhone

At Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference in June, Nuance Communications unveiled a new prototype for voice search capabilities shown on the iPhone. Nuance mounted a sidewalk show in which a straight-jacketed man swinging upside down verbally interacted with his iPhone.

The much-hyped vSearch prototype, due to be released for the iPhone in the fall, will allow users to speak requests into their phones to search the mobile Web. Among its other plans for the application, Nuance is looking to incorporate technologies that will allow users to dictate text or email messages.

Nuance's open voice search application builds on the vSearch mobile application originally developed by VoiceSignal, which Nuance acquired in May 2007. VoiceSignal demonstrated a proof-of-concept showing vSearch on the iPhone last August.

When the iPhone was first released in June of last year, many in the speech industry took umbrage over the lack of a voice interface. Jim Larson, an independent consultant and VoiceXML trainer, even went so far as to call this absence a blow to the industry.

But recent developments have changed this perception. A significant number of speech technology providers have, during the past few weeks, launched new applications for the iPhone, quieting some of the outrage.

One of those application providers is YouMail, which in mid-June released a public beta of its visual voicemail for smartphones, especially the iPhone. The new mobile platform allows users to listen to voicemail messages, forward messages to other people in their iPhone address books, or reply via SMS without ever having to dial into their voicemail service.

A few weeks after the YouMail launch, hosted telephone application platform provider ifbyphone released a group message broadcast application that enables iPhone users to send recorded messages to as many recipients as they want without using their calling-plan minutes. The ifbyphone application works with any iPhone running the v2 software and also works with Apple's iPod Touch.

Other application providers that have released software versions of their products for the iPhone in the past few months include IVO Software, a text-to-speech vendor whose Expressivo TTS v1.3 was launched specifically for the iPhone and iPod Touch, and Internet communications provider Raketu, which released a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) application for the iPhone and iPod Touch.

But of all the applications being introduced, those that bring a voice element to mobile search on the iPhone or other mobile device are capturing the most buzz.

Taking into account the limited real estate provided by mobile devices, Bill Meisel, president of TMA Associates, believes that "sooner or later, the voice user interface will be the dominant one. The dominant model on mobile phones will be a voice search-type interface."

That's one of the reasons that Yahoo!, at the CTIA Wireless conference in April, announced the speechification of its oneSearch open search portal with voice technology powered by Massachusetts start-up company vlingo.

But in launching its mobile search application, Nuance faces hurdles similar to those of vlingo, Microsoft subsidiary Tellme, and any other vendors marketing voice search technologies for mobile devices: The carriers have enough control to veto an application.

"That's a key aspect to the mobile phone industry that's different from the way the PC evolved, where no one could tell you what to put on your PC," Meisel says. While Apple's application programming interface doesn't actively disallow applications, the company doesn't offer any official approval either.

"There's not a big splash, and that hurts Nuance," Meisel continues. "They can't promote it. It only works on certain models and by permission of the service provider."

One of the reasons for such a significant uptick in interest by vendors looking to develop mobile voice search applications is its huge potential to generate advertising revenue in much the same way Google captured the ad market for text search on computers. "The ad market on mobile phones and the ability to sell ads and get revenue-generating sales are extraordinary," Meisel says. "Obviously, that has less impact on a company like Microsoft. If Nuance gets a small part of that business with reasonable control, it'd be a huge asset." —*Ryan Joe*

> 66 **The dominant model on mobile phones will be a voice search-type interface.** 99