

Six Things You Never Knew Your Cell Phone Could Do

Here are useful tips and tricks that you can teach even an old cell phone to do.

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Right before your eyes, your cell phone has morphed into a portable computer. Whether you're searching Google via text messages, using [Short Message Service](#) (SMS) to make international calls, or e-mailing a voice message, these tips will help jump-start your cell phone's inner PC--and make your life easier to boot.

Text Your Google Search

For the price of sending a text message, you can unleash the power of Google without having to open a Web browser. Just text **GOOGL (46645)** to get access to much of the search giant's most useful information, including addresses and phone numbers, word definitions, numeric and other conversions, weather, and even sports scores.

For example, if you want to look up the phone number of a pizza joint to place a take-out order, text-message the name of the business and its city and state to **GOOGL**, such as **zachary's oakland, ca**. A minute or so later, Google will send you a text message similar to this: 'Local Listings: Zachary's Chicago Pizza 5801 College Ave Oakland, 94618 510-655-6385'. To save time, enter the zip code instead of the city and state.

To look for more-general information, text something like **pizza 94618** to receive the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all the pizzerias in that area. (This is especially handy when you're in a city or neighborhood you're unfamiliar with and you're jonesing for a double espresso.)



Google's ability to text you word definitions helps you compose just the right message to send with that bouquet of flowers you're ordering, and it also can adjudicate tense games of Scrabble. To get a definition, text **GOOGL** with the command **define:** followed by the word (with no space between), such as **define:qindarka**. How else will you ever find out that there are precisely 100 qindarkas in a single Albanian lek (which, oddly enough, is also the name of that country's national vegetable).

You can text Google for all sorts of conversions, too. For example, if you want to convert pounds to kilograms, or liters to quarts, or even find out the number of miles in a light-year, text **GOOGL** and enter **2 liters in quarts**. You'll receive a text back with the answer faster than you can say '2.1133764188651876'. To convert foreign currency at the current exchange rate, text: **\$100 in euros** (the three-letter abbreviation for different currencies also works, such as **100 usd in eur**).

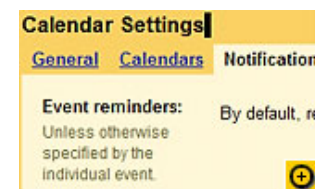
Google has many other options for fast lookups from your phone. To find out the forecast for a region, text **weather** and the city name, such as **weather Peoria, IL**. During last summer's pennant races, I almost wore out my phone's dial pad using Google to check scores. To find out how your team is doing, simply text its name, such as **Dodgers** to see how things are going in Chavez Ravine.

Depending on your cell-phone plan, sending a lot of text messages to Google may launch your monthly bill into the stratosphere. Check to see if your service provider offers any special deals for high-volume texting before you start punching those buttons.

SMS: Get Google Calendar Alerts, Make Calls

If you use Google Calendar to keep track of your appointments, you can send yourself SMS reminders of the events you have listed. Once you've [signed up](#) with Google and logged in, you can add your upcoming activities to your online calendar, too.

To set alerts for the events, click *Settings* at the top right of the page, choose *Notifications*, scroll to



the bottom of the page, and enter your country, phone number, and cell provider. Google will then text you a verification code to enter on this page. After you enter the code, check the boxes for event reminders at the top of the page. Once you have events in your Google Calendar, the service will send you a text-message reminder for each upcoming event. Alternatively, you can ask to be sent a daily agenda, which includes all of that day's events.

Call Via SMS

Anyone who makes a lot of international calls can use SMS to take advantage of cheaper rates. Two of my favorite SMS services are [Call2.com](#) and U.K. ISP Telecomplete's [MyWebCalls.com](#). Both allow you to send an SMS message to their servers, which then either place the call (if you have previously registered the number you're calling) or call you back with a dial-tone allowing you to enter the number manually.

Call2.com uses standard phone lines, while MyWebCalls.com is VoIP-based, which is cheaper but may be less reliable. Calling France on MyWebCalls.com is 1.4 cents per minute, while on Call2.com it's nearly 6 cents per minute.

After you register for the service, you text the number that the service assigns you (you may also need to enter a password). You could use this service to place domestic calls as well, but the real savings come when placing calls from outside the United States. Read our reviews of [three other VoIP-based services](#) for cell phones.

Take Notes Via a Camera Phone; Call 411 for Free

The next time you're heading to a meeting, leave your notepad (or your laptop) behind and let your camera phone record the meeting notes. The [Qipit service](#) lets you convert the text in an image captured by a cell-phone camera (or any other digital camera) into a PDF file (it will also be available as a JPEG). After you register for the service by providing your name, country, and e-mail address, you enter your cell number, service provider, and phone model.

The service indicates the quality of text scans you can expect. For example, my Motorola Razr V3c rated only one out of three stars. After you photograph, say, the whiteboard or your own handwritten notes, you e-mail the image file to the service ([copy@qipit.com](#) for black-and-white images, and [color@qipit.com](#) for color), and it is added to your list of files. As we went to press, the service is free, but it's limited to 25 documents per account, and it supports only JPEGs with a minimum resolution of 1.3 megapixels. You pay only the cost of an [MMS](#) message. (Note that you can also send the service images to be scanned and converted via e-mail.)

Make 411 Calls for Free

A more traditional way to find information about a business than texting Google (see the [first tip](#)) is to use your phone company's directory-assistance service, aka 411. However, most cell phone providers charge \$1 or more for each 411 call. Fortunately, there's a free alternative: 1-800-FREE-411.

Just like the name implies, a quick call to the number puts you through to an automated voice-recognition program (similar to the old-fashioned 411) that asks for the city, state, and name of your listing. The catch is that before the service gives you the number, you have to listen to a short ad. I tested the service by asking for "Mughlai," an Indian restaurant in New York City. While the service didn't at first understand "Mughlai" (pronounced MOOG-lie), it understood my second attempt, "Mughlai Restaurant," without any difficulty.

Connect With Friends; Send Voice Mail via E-Mail

Extend your social network to your cell phone via [Dodgeball](#), a free online service--with 15,000 members and growing--that allows you to broadcast your location to friends by sending a text message to the service. Instead of calling or texting each of your friends individually to say that you're at the local pub cheering for your March Madness picks, or commiserating over your alma mater's early exit, you can send a single message and let Dodgeball do the heavy lifting. After you sign up for the service using your Google login,

you set up a profile that asks for your home city and gender (you can choose not to specify gender), as well as your cell phone number and service provider, and the number or e-mail address you want your messages sent to (you can also choose to receive photos, though this option is turned off by default).



Once your friends sign up, you add them as "friends" in your profile. The next time you're out and about, you send Dodgeball a text with the message '@Joe's Bar and Spa' to let your buddies know that you're grabbing a beer and a rubdown. The message they receive will include the address of the location you checked in at. Plus, your friends' friends will automatically be notified if they're within 10 blocks of your vicinity.

Send Voice Messages via E-Mail

Now you can send voice messages to anyone without ever dialing their number. The free [Pinger service](#) lets you record audio messages that are delivered as e-mail attachments. After you sign up for the service, you set up your address book on the site (you can import your existing contacts from Gmail, Outlook, and most other large e-mail services). Pinger provides you with your own local voice-mail number that you can use to send and receive messages. Call your number, say the name of the person you wish to leave a message for, speak the message, and you're done. The recipient can listen to the message without having to sit through long and annoying canned greetings.

Further, you can send the same message (such as a party invitation) to a group of people at one time. Each person on the other end will receive a text message alerting them to a new voice message they can retrieve by calling the number it lists. Recipients can reply to the voice message simply by pressing 1, or they can forward the message to someone else. Another neat feature: All of the voice messages you send and receive are archived at Pinger.com and are accessible from any computer--great for leaving voice notes to yourself.