

realitycheck

YESTERDAY'S HYPE MEETS TODAY'S REALITY



STATS Users at the end of the 90s: several hundred thousand / Remaining users in July 2005: 10,000

Wildfire ignites, then extinguishes

➔ From 1990 through 1995, Massachusetts-based Wildfire Communications developed and marketed the Wildfire telephone-based “virtual assistant,” which was the subject of a significant amount of media coverage and numerous favorable—even rave—reviews. Based on voice recognition of a few hundred key words, the device allowed subscribers to call in, ask for their messages, route and forward calls, manage contacts, send faxes, and more. It was a 24-hour-a-day, remotely accessible secretary—admittedly with fewer capabilities—costing \$10 to \$20 per month per user. By the end of the decade, the system boasted several hundred thousand active users, and the On PR public-relations agency was even taking some of the credit for its success (www.onpr.com/results/case_studies/HowTheEnterprise_Wildfire.asp).

The service was doing so well that, in April 2000, Orange plc (part of France Telecom) purchased Wildfire for €148 million and rolled out service to the United Kingdom, France, and Italy, operating through regional-phone-operating companies. But with the rise and accessibility of e-mail, the Web, cell phones, and other communications modes, Wildfire had just 10,000 remaining users by July 2005, and Orange pulled the plug on the product and service.—by Bill Schweber