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Apple Keeps Google Voice for iPhone on the Table



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In a letter to the FCC, Apple specified that it hasn't actually rejected Google's Voice application for the iPhone -- rather, it's still under consideration. The letter was a response to an FCC inquiry on why exactly the Google Voice application has not yet become available to users. Apple denied consulting with AT&T on the matter, and AT&T said the

same in its own letter to the FCC.

[Apple](#) (Nasdaq: AAPL) and [AT&T](#) (NYSE: T) on Friday maintained that they did not consult with each other on whether the [Google](#) (Nasdaq: GOOG) Voice application would make the cut for inclusion in Apple's App Store for iPhones. Rather, responses sent to the [Federal Communications Commission](#) by Apple and AT&T in response to the agency's query on the matter reveal typical business-related motivations by the parties.

To recap: At the beginning of the month, the FCC sent letters to AT&T, Apple and Google trying to determine the reasoning behind Apple's rejection of Google Voice -- an app competing with partner AT&T -- for its App Store. Google Voice lets users send free text messages, make free domestic phone calls and make international calls at low rates. Apple was suspected to have made the decision in deference to AT&T -- and possibly future partners -- whose own wireless offerings might have been undercut by the app.

Although FCC regulations on wireless providers and their application stores are still a work in progress, the questions in the inquiry were pointed: Did AT&T and Apple consult on whether to reject this and other competing apps?

Of Brands and WiFi Connections

Apple says it is hesitant to approve Google Voice application -- it has not formally rejected the app yet, it noted -- because it [preempts its own user interface](#), which the company says is key to the iPhone brand.

"Contrary to published reports, Apple has not rejected the Google Voice application, and continues to study it. The application has not been approved because, as submitted for review, it appears to alter the iPhone's distinctive user experience by replacing the iPhone's core mobile telephone functionality

and Apple user interface with its own user interface for telephone calls, text messaging and voicemail," reads Apple's official response.

Furthermore, Apple claimed it did not consult with AT&T about whether or not to approve the Google Voice application. "No contractual conditions or non-contractual understandings with AT&T have been a factor in Apple's decision-making process in this matter," its message reads.

For its part, AT&T maintained a similar hands-off role in the decision.

"AT&T does not participate in Apple's day-to-day consideration of whether particular iPhone applications should or should not be rejected for use on the iPhone. Nor does Apple typically notify AT&T when it rejects a particular application for use on the iPhone," James W. Cicconi, senior executive vice president of external and legislative affairs at AT&T, wrote in response.

There is an agreement between the two companies, however, under which Apple will not take steps to enable an iPhone to use AT&T's wireless service (including 2G, 3G and Wi-Fi) to make VoIP calls without first obtaining AT&T's consent. "AT&T and Apple also agreed, however, that if a third party enables an iPhone to make VoIP calls using AT&T's wireless service, Apple would have no obligation to take action against that third party," Cicconi wrote.

The answers make sense, Ryan Radia, an analyst with the [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#), told the E-Commerce Times. "Apple has long been a company concerned with its brand image and with offering a coherent user experience." Understandably, it would be concerned about replacing its native Apple interface with another vendors, he said.

"Apple wants to deliver an Apple-branded product -- and they don't want other vendors to take a free ride on their platform." If users don't agree with this approach, he said, there is plenty of competition in the smartphone and cellular markets that they can vote with their feet.

More to the point, given the way Google Voice works -- it is not a VoIP app, in other words -- there is no reason why AT&T would have been involved in the decision to reject or approve Google Voice, he said.

Even assuming the worst speculation is true -- that AT&T did collude with Apple to keep Google Voice out of the App Store -- "the iPhone isn't nearly a dominant enough player to merit an FCC inquiry," Radia concluded.

New Path for FCC

The FCC may disagree with that point, albeit not publicly -- at least not yet, according to Jonathan L. Kramer, founding attorney of [Kramer Telecom Law Firm](#).

"Every company makes business decisions designed to promote the bottom line, and this is but one example of a profit-seeking policy," he told the E-Commerce Times.

That said, the FCC hasn't provided clear guidance as to what responsibilities telecom providers carrying VoIP packets of other vendors must follow. "Does any of this violate FCC regulations? I don't think the FCC knows the answer to that yet," Kramer concluded. [ECT](#)

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