

The New York Times

Bits

Business ■ Innovation ■ Technology ■ Society

FEBRUARY 5, 2010, 12:00 AM

A Personal Assistant on Your iPhone

By [JENNA WORTHAM](#)

The pop-culture record shows that most artificially intelligent assistants don't work out too well for their human masters.

There's the comically co-dependent — and largely unhelpful — duo from Star Wars, C-3PO and R2-D2. And who could forget HAL 9000, the glowing red orb from “2001: A Space Odyssey,” with a slightly murderous malfunction?

A start-up called [Siri](#), based in San Jose, Calif., hopes to do a slightly better job by bringing a virtual personal assistant to your pocket — more specifically, to your Apple iPhone.

Various riffs on the virtual personal assistant concept have been around for while. [Remember the Milk](#) and [Jott](#) are examples of electronic crutches intended to help users be more efficient and complete tasks. And during the dot-com era, there was a great deal of hype about a coming generation of digital “agents” that were supposed to go out and perform various tasks for people on the Web.

But where Siri breaks away from the pack, says Dag Kittlaus, co-founder and chief executive of the company, is that it is “speech recognition with a brain.”

“This is the first version of a computer assistance that understands language, has the ability to delegate tasks and learn,” Mr. Kittlaus said.

First, users speak a command, like, “Find a table for two at 9 tonight,” “Get two tickets to ‘Crazy Heart’ at 8,” “Send a taxi to my house,” or even “What kid-friendly events are going on in New York this weekend?” Using G.P.S. and speech-recognition technology powered by Nuance, the application translates the spoken command and uses a set of algorithms to search for the answer.

Mr. Kittlaus describes the application as the “mother of mash-ups” because the company has partnered with several companies, including OpenTable, MovieTickets, StubHub, CitySearch and TaxiMagic, to generate results.

Siri is a “do engine rather than a search engine,” Mr. Kittlaus said.

Siri, which was founded in 2007, was incubated in SRI International, as part of a [DARPA](#)-financed artificial intelligence project called [CALO](#), or Cognitive Agent that Learns and

Organizes. As a result, Mr. Kittlaus said, Siri will learn more about its user and tailor its results based on preferences over time.

Currently, the application is available [free for download](#).

“This is intended for everyone to help in their menial tasks,” Mr. Kittlaus said, “not just for someone in a corner office.”

To make money, the company says it receives a small fee from any monetary transactions, like purchasing movie tickets, that are conducted through Siri.

Recently, the company closed a \$15.5 million Series B round of venture financing, led by Li Ka-Shing, a Chinese billionaire who has also invested in [Facebook](#) and the music streaming service Spotify. Previously, the company raised \$8.5 million from Menlo Ventures and Morgenthaler Ventures.

Currently, Siri is available only for the iPhone, but the company intends to also offer versions compatible with Android phones and BlackBerrys.

The company also hopes to introduce features that will allow users to send requests to Siri via e-mail and instant message.