

Siri, Apple's New Old Personal Assistant App, Points Toward A Voice-Activated Future

Wade Roush | 10/5/11

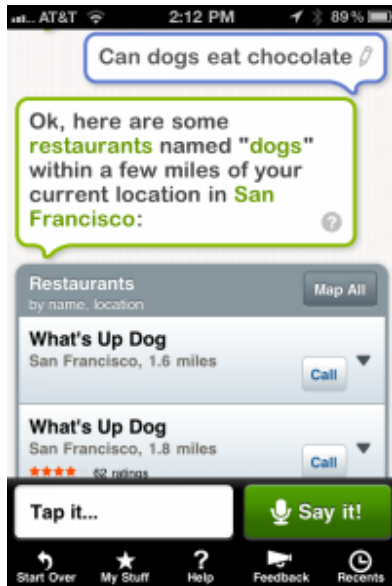


I have seen the future, and it's right here in my hands. While the rest of you poor suckers will have to wait until October 14 to try **Siri** on the new iPhone 4S, I'm looking at this magical, revolutionary technology right now. I'm using it to check the weather, book restaurant tables, set reminders, and send tweets—all with the power of my voice.

How did I pull off this stunning journalistic exclusive? By powering up my old iPhone. I've had the Siri app installed since the spring of 2010—before Apple even bought the **SRI International spinoff for which the app is named**.

What short memories most members of the tech media seem to have. After Apple's event Tuesday introducing the iPhone 4S, a slew of stories hit the Web with headlines like "**Apple Debuts Siri**" and "**Apple Reveals Siri Voice Interface**." The true part, as Apple senior vice president Phil Schiller explained on stage yesterday, is that Apple has taken the added step of baking Siri into its newest iPhone. Just hold down the iPhone 4S home button and you can ask Siri practical questions or assign it basic tasks. (Ask "Will I need an umbrella this weekend?" and it will come back with something like "It doesn't look like rain is likely this weekend near San Francisco 94107." Ask it "What's the melting point of lead?" and it answers with a precise 327.46 degrees Celsius—with a little help from Wolfram Alpha).

But Siri isn't actually new. It was introduced to the world as a third-party app for the iPhone 3G on February 5, 2010, and had a brief life as the flagship application for the startup of the same name, which won \$24 million in funding from Menlo Ventures and Morgenthaler Ventures. Then Apple came into the story, snapping up the company in April 2010 for a reported \$150 million to \$250 million. The Siri inventors, who mostly hailed from SRI International, disappeared behind the Great Wall of Cupertino.



Apple stayed mum about Siri for the next 18 months—and there were some who feared that the app would go the way of **Lala**, the cloud music service that Apple bought in December 2009 and shuttered in May 2010. But Apple has long included voice-recognition features in its iOS devices as part of the accessibility options; moreover, it faces **stiff competition from Google** in the area of voice-driven personal assistant technology. So it was a no-brainer that the company would look for ways to integrate the Siri technology with other iPhone functions, such as e-mail, text-messaging, the music player, maps, reminders, and notifications. And that's

what the new Siri release is about. It's like the iPhone is getting a new brain. (Watch the Apple video on page 2 of this article for a brief summary.)

While the Siri developers labored behind the scenes to meld the technology into the iPhone 4S, the original Siri app lived in on the iTunes App Store—until yesterday, anyway. It still works great, with some limitations. It's as much about artificial intelligence—understanding ambiguity and making smart inferences—as it is about voice recognition. But it's not a *Star Trek*-style talking encyclopedia—if you venture beyond practical queries relating to your daily activities, it will be at a loss. (When I asked Siri “Can dogs eat chocolate?” it gave me a list of nearby restaurants with “dog” in the title. Surprisingly, there are a dozen of them within a 10-mile radius of my home.)

People like me who've already got the app on their phones can keep using it until October 15, according to a notification shared inside the app. After that, the program will be available on the iPhone 4S only.

Why Apple isn't implementing Siri across all iOS devices as part of the expected October 8 rollout of iOS 5 isn't clear. Some observers are speculating that Siri is such a CPU hog that it can only run on the more powerful dual-core A5 processor built into the iPhone 4S. But Apple itself hasn't said this explicitly, and the iPad 2 also has an A5 processor, so by this argument, Siri ought to run just fine on that device.

The more likely explanation is that Apple felt it needed to sex up the iPhone 4S—which isn't all that different from the iPhone 4, if the truth be told—with some exclusive new

features. I'm betting that Apple has had this strategy of saving Siri for the iPhone 4S in mind all along, explaining why Siri was MIA at Apple's June press event, when some analysts had expected it would be announced as part of iOS 5.

The iPhone 4 is a darn good phone—perhaps too good. Sixteen months in, it's a much better value than the original iPhone or the iPhone 3G were at the same point in their own life cycles. Speaking for myself, I can't see upgrading to the 4S just to get Siri, or the A5 processor, or the new 8-megapixel camera. But Apple always rolls things out in stages, and it's as predictable as foggy mornings in San Francisco that voice-driven personal assistant technology will eventually show up in every Apple device that has a microphone.

The real question is how fast Apple will move in this direction, and whether it will eventually give third-party developers access to Siri's capabilities through new application programming interfaces, like those developers use to access other basic phone functions. Gary Morgenthaler, a partner at Morgenthaler Ventures in Menlo Park, CA, and a former board member at both Siri and Nuance, **argued in these pages in June** that Apple should throw open the gates, the better to encourage innovation:

Apple can either integrate Nuance and Siri a little—or a lot. I say, go big. Don't use the incredible power of these two best-in-class technologies to manage Apple-only applications. Sure, it would be fun to say, "Open iTunes. Play Born This Way by Lady Gaga," instead of typing it out. But it would be far more transformative to open up the API to allow all of Apple's 100,000-plus registered developers to dream up ways to use voice recognition and natural language AI in their own third-party apps.

That's not what Apple is doing, at least not yet. And that's understandable: the company probably wants to get consumers into the habit of using voice and natural language for basic tasks before it lets developers go wild. You can be sure, however, that by the time the real iPhone 5 or "iOS 5.5" roll around—meaning, I'd guess, late 2012—there will be a whole new generation of voice-activated apps vying for our attention.

Imagine, for example, being able to call up a movie in the Netflix app by name, then play or pause the film with a few spoken commands. Or dictating a diary entry into **Evernote**. Or baking a soufflé as your iPad reads you the instructions aloud and answers questions when you get stuck. The possibilities inherent in Siri are enormous—

and if Apple doesn't let iOS developers explore them soon, it will cede this area of innovation to Google and the Android community.

Wade Roush is Xconomy's chief correspondent and editor of Xconomy San Francisco. You can e-mail him at wroush@xconomy.com or follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/wroush.