SKYPE 2.5 (beta)

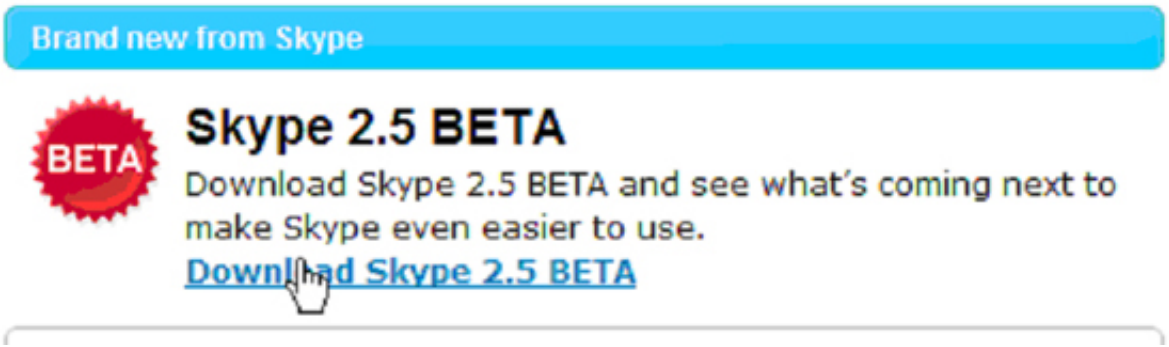
We first talked about Skype, the software program by which you can make free phone calls most anywhere in the world, last September in Talk Is Cheap.

Last week Skype marked quite a milestone: 100,000,000 registered users. That's just the number of downloads, though-there aren't necessarily that many regular users.

Still, at any moment, several million people in the world are online using Skype whether for free Skype-to-Skype voice calls, instant messaging chat, video calls, or to take advantage of the premium services that actually earn Skype its money. That's impressive by any measure.

As of May 3, 2006, there's a new and modestly improved version of Skype available for download. Skype 2.5 beta is most compelling for new users, and could bring more into the fold.

Scroll down the home page until you get to here:



The software installation has been simplified from basically three clicks in version 2.0 to one and filling out a brief form.

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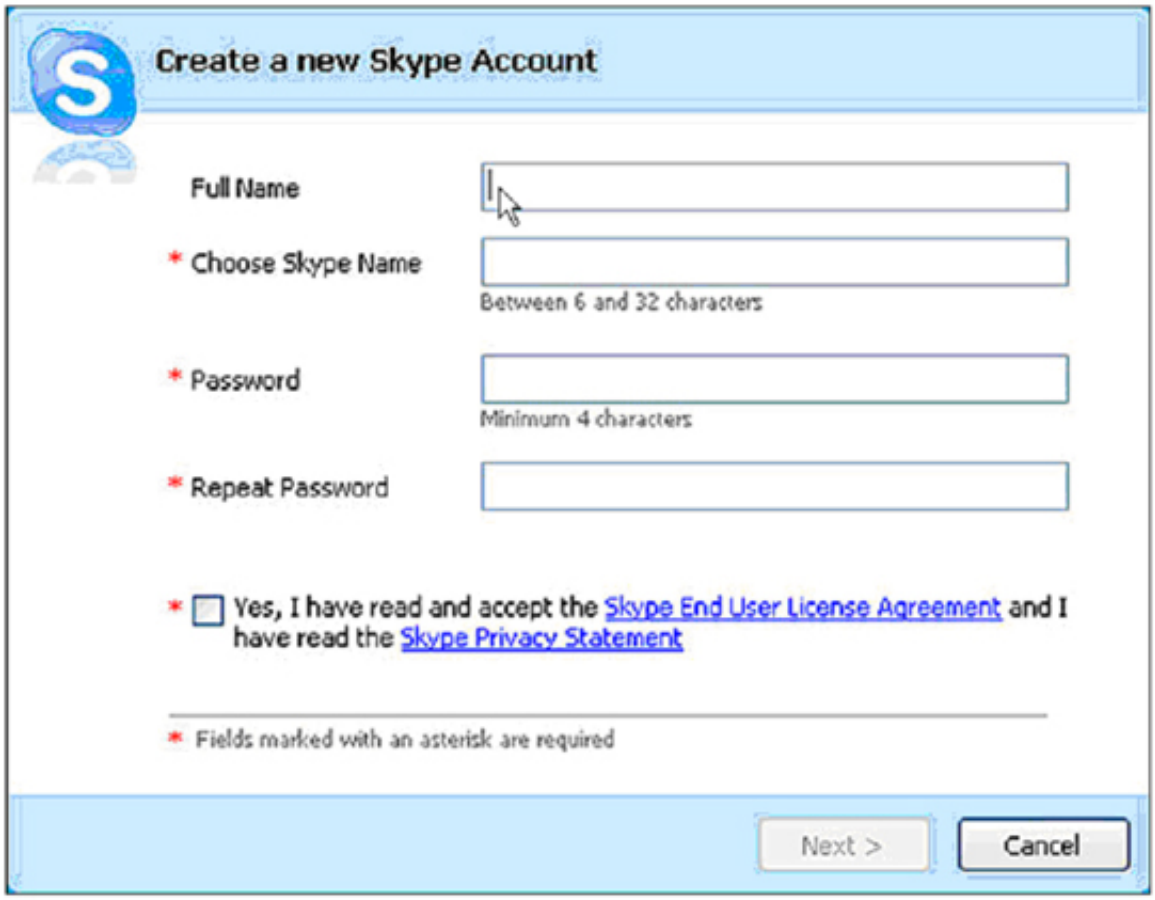


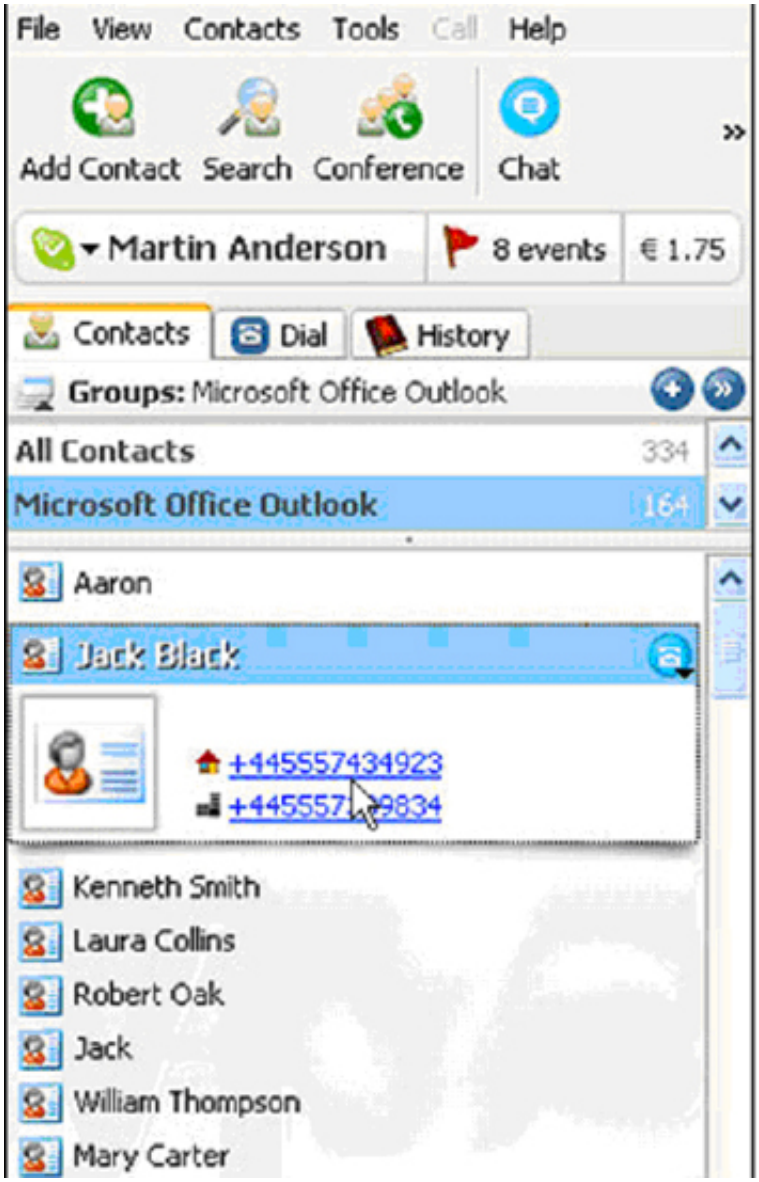
The new user interface looks largely the same as the one in version 2.0, and video features haven't changed at all. Security remains the same too, with end-to-end PGP encryption of everything you do. (Skype also has regular 3rd-party security audits.)

Basically, those using Skype's premium services including SkypeIn, SkypeOut, and voicemail, and those making lots of international SkypeOut calls stand to benefit most from an upgrade.

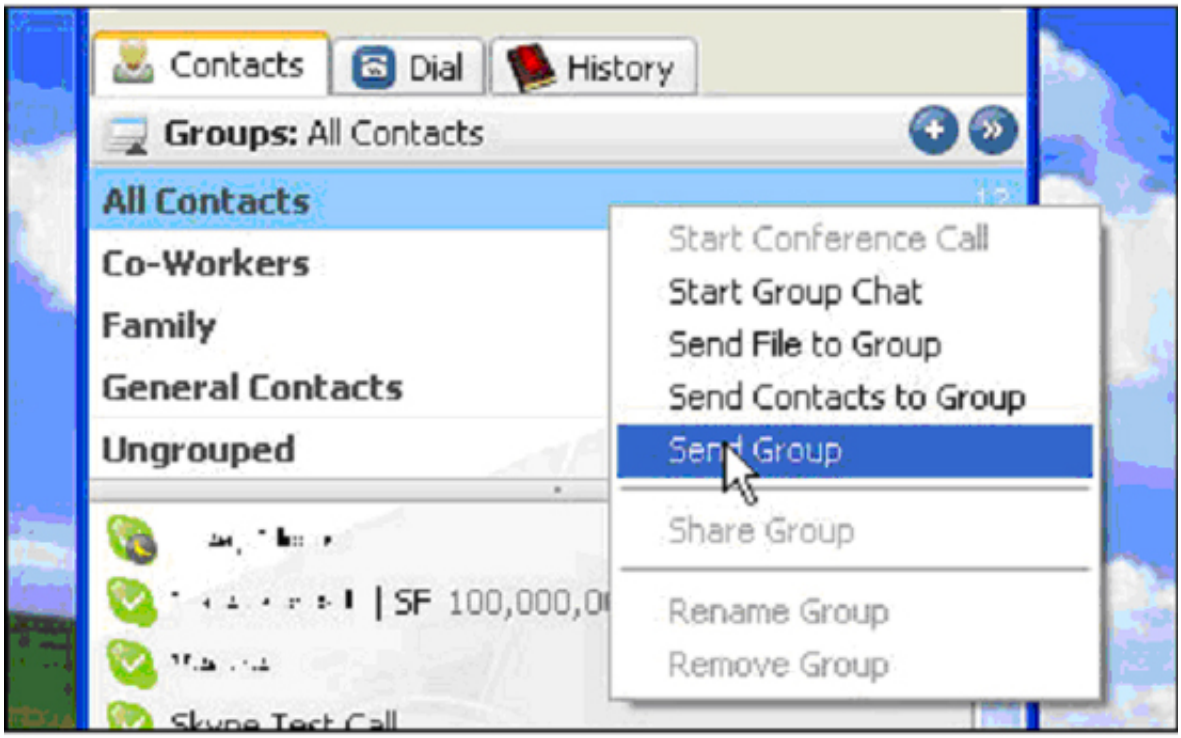
The new version simplifies the process of adding credits to your account for premium services and is available for 15 different currencies-Skype-to-Skype calls remain as free as ever.

When you place foreign calls, the service can also tell where you are calling from, and you no longer need to input access codes manually when making SkypeOut calls to other countries; there's a drop-down menu.

The new release also lets you get to your Outlook contacts so you don't have to look them up and then enter numbers manually for SkypeOut calls. Your contact info isn't uploaded to Skype or even copied from Outlook, you can just see the data from within the client if you've set up SkypeOut.



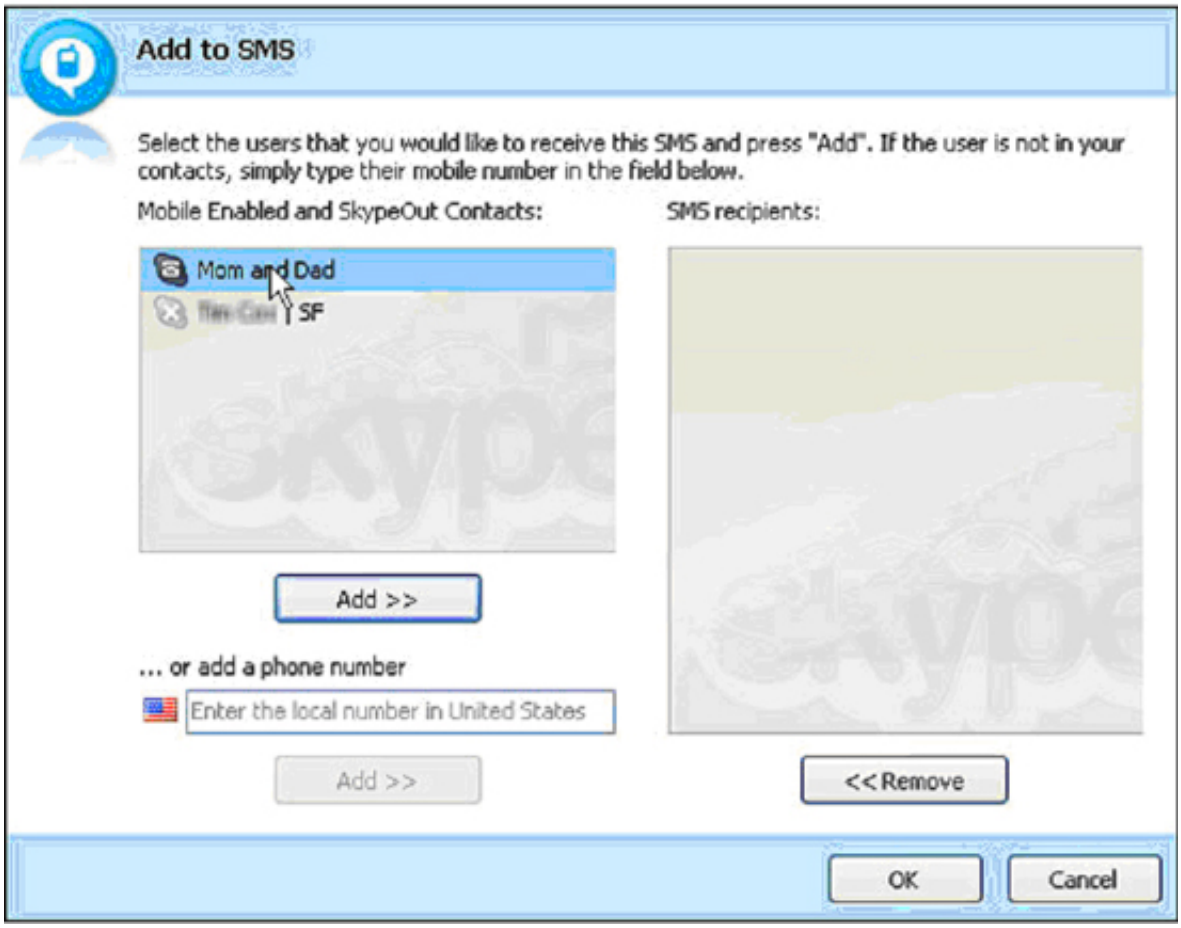
This version also makes sharing contacts easier, which might make you more successful at getting family members hooked. If mom and dad have a tough time searching for and adding other family members and friends, you can easily set up a family contact group and then share it with them.



Skype also now has a call-quality indicator that gives suggestions for improving your connection, but the most common one seems to be to end your call, close Skype, open it, and try again.

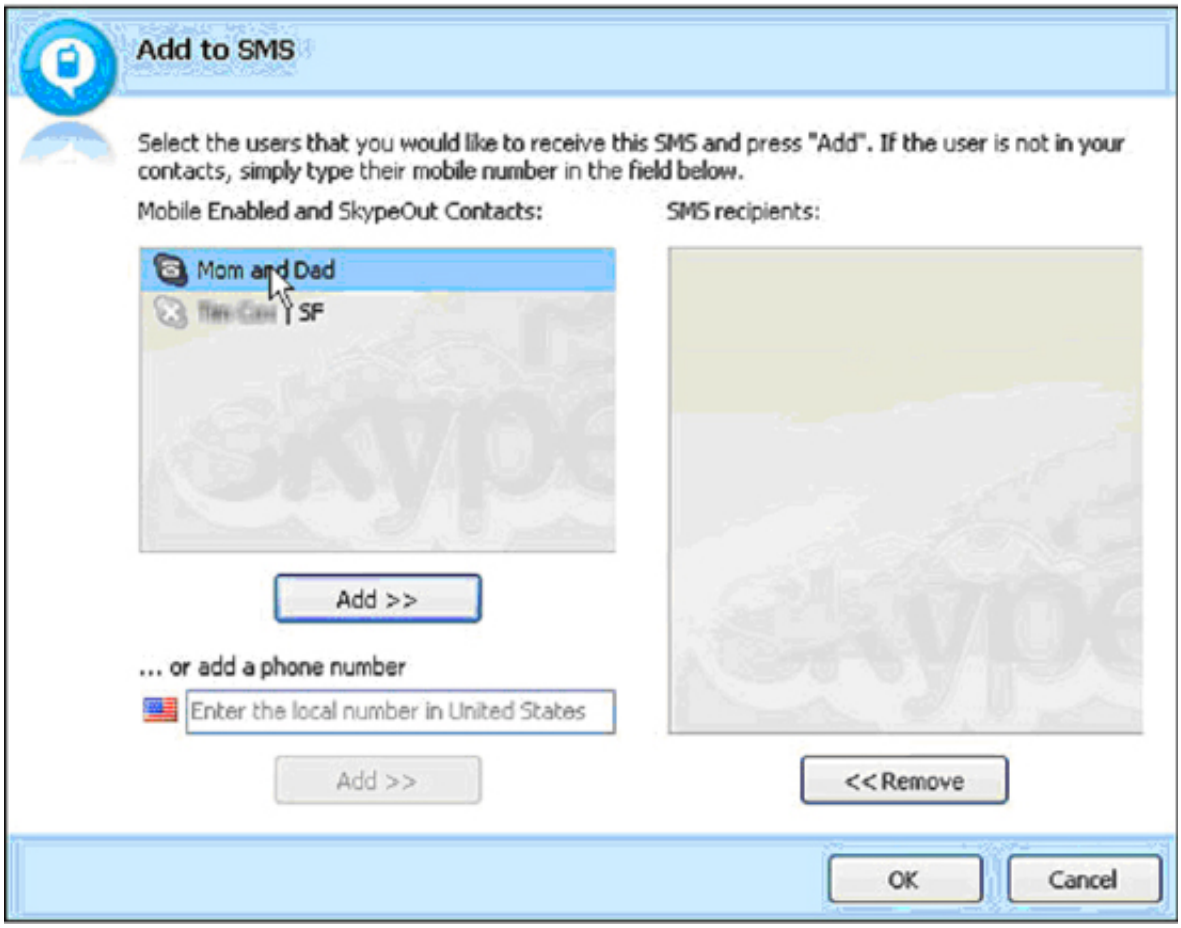
Still, when your call quality could be better, at least you get a visual indicator-a yellow shaded box-which is more than you previously got. Of course, the old system-feedback from the person on the other end-is still the most accurate.

Skype 2.5 lets you send one-way SMS messages to cell phones anywhere in the world , a feature I suspect will be more popular in foreign markets. Costs can range from 2 cents to roughly 25 cents per message depending on the location of both the sender and person receiving the message.



The people at Skype are excited about a new capability they call Skypecasting, which you can think of as a moderated, multi-person voice conversation that you access in real time via the Web, using Skype.

Suppose you're interested in the next Mars rover landing. You could create and host a Skypecast from the Share menu on the service's home page. You can also search for casts that interest you.



You'll find Skypecasts that are available immediately or in the future. As a moderator and host, you see a window similar to your address book that shows who is part of the cast and who is talking. You can click on names to decide who gets to talk and to shut people down. This feature is the result of a collaboration with blogging pioneer Six Apart. Keep in mind that this service is in a very preliminary pilot stage.

There are also several new Skype-certified devices available, including a Creative Voice Webcam ($99.99 list, with built-in microphone, noise cancellation, and wide-angle lens), a cordless dual phone from Philips (VOIP321, $100 list, for use on both Skype and regular landline calls), and the Polycom Communicator ($129 list, a USB speaker phone). This brings the total number of available Skype-certified products up to 200.

MSN, Yahoo and Google among others also now have many of these features, but they aren't as complete and as well integrated as Skype. In addition MSN and Yahoo have the irritating feature that you can't be signed in on your laptop and desktop simultaneously. Both Google and Skype permit this rather obviously needed and easily implemented feature.

Dennis Turner