



SELLphone

My, how times have changed. I recall when having a telephone not connected to any wire was impressive. Longtime readers of this column also may recall reading about my dad and his famous "briefcase phone" mounted to his bike during the 1970s oil crisis. Like today, 30 years ago staying in touch with prospects, the office, and clients was an important part of a producer's daily routine. Thankfully, communication technologies have evolved since those days, and it now is easier than ever for the agent on the go to keep in touch.

I do not know of many producers these days who are "cell-less." I believe that a producer without a cellular plan is really a producer without a selling plan. The cellular telephone has been around for some time now, so it is not surprising to find it a primary tool of our trade. I refer to mine as my "sellphone."

Technology keeps marching forward, and it now is possible to buy a cellular telephone with a built-in personal digital assistant (PDA) or a close counterpart that offers some form of PDA functionality. The producer can check his or her calendar, look up contacts, and make a telephone call all from the same handy little unit. An added bonus is that now most are offered with screens that can display brilliant full color images. As the producer will see, the merging of PDAs, voice organizers, and cellular telephone technology is inevitable. More and more, we will see added functionality in all cellular telephones.

Today's cutting edge cell telephones enable the producer to snap a picture and send it via e-mail. At best this should be considered a novelty, although this technology could be used to store pictures of a producer's clients to store in a database. In their present incarnation, cellular telephone cameras are slow and limited. A producer would be better served to invest in a real digital camera.

Can You Hear Me Now?

That seems to be the question of the day. The promise of consistent coverage is still a dream. While cellular telephone coverage has improved dramatically over the past decade, the areas of not so great coverage still exist.

The one-mile radius around my house is a perfect example. For reasons beyond my comprehension, it is particularly problematic. I recently switched providers because of a lack of good service in town. I now have fairly good coverage almost everywhere I go, except in my own back yard.

While vendors have touted the “no static” line in their advertising as they have progressed from analog to digital phones, they have neglected to mention that the static merely has been replaced by unintelligible digital squawks. In areas of poor coverage (like the one around my home), callers at times tend to sound more like the teacher from Charlie Brown.

3G and Other Celly Stuff

Producers may have heard of it and some even may be using it. The 3G, also known as the third generation cellular telephone technology, is to be the next best thing for cellular telephones since, well, cellular telephones! Anyone who has had a pre-3G Internet capable telephone can relate to the slow Internet connection speeds and limited number of Web sites available.

The 3G technology is supposed to solve these problems and add a host of other capabilities, and yes, it even is supposed to make video conferencing from cellular telephones a reality. Don't hold your breath, however, or go rushing out to buy the latest and greatest just yet. There is at least a two- to five-year wait before most of this becomes a reality and is affordable for the everyday producer.

To understand this over-promised and under-delivered concept, one must realize that a cellular telephone signal travels only a few miles. Imagine the number of cellular telephone towers that must be upgraded to facilitate the 3G technology to offer nationwide coverage. This will require quite an investment, and cellular telephone companies will want to ensure a return on their money.

Sprint is the only service provider that offers nationwide 3G service, as it has invested heavily in this infrastructure from the outset. The 3G coverage from other providers will be spotty or unavailable in some areas. This does not mean, however, that 3G technology will not be available soon. It is being rolled out at a feverish pace.

3G'ing Around

With that said, cranking up the speed and capacity of 3G networks will require time. As an example, the older second generation Internet capable wireless telephones transferred data at breathtakingly slow 10kps, one-fifth the speed of a good dial-up connection on a producer's computer. Current 3G technology can deliver wireless data at a slightly faster speed of 64 to 128kps. The promise of 3G is

eventually to crank the wireless data transfer rates to above 384kps for a user who is in motion, such as in an automobile, and up to 2mbps for a user who is stationary. This theoretically would provide enough bandwidth to allow for video conferencing.

Another benefit of 3G is that it allows for the use of standard Internet Protocol. This enables users to browse the Internet freely, unlike the second generation telephones where use was limited to select Web sites that were designed specifically for the technology. It is not easy to view sites designed for large desktop monitors on a 1.5" x 1.5" screen.

A recent article touted the capability of 3G technology enabling data transfer at speeds of up to 19mbps under laboratory conditions. To me this only demonstrates that this technology is in its infancy. In Europe, 3G technology is a good step ahead of the United States. It has been available there for more than two years, in contrast to its recent introduction to the U.S. market last year. Some excellent resources to learn more about the coming 3G cellular telephone revolution may be found at www.the3gportal.com and www.wirelessweek.com.

Tap, Tap, Tap

A problem that may hamper user demand in the short term is the interface used to type words or messages. The numeric keypads on cellular phones are designed for numbers. This forces the user to tap out the alphabet by numbers. As an example, the letter S is found on the number 7. To type one S the user must tap the number 7 button four times. This makes for slow typing.

Developers will need to come up with better ways for users to interface with the technology. Voice recognition is an obvious choice. Currently this technology is limited to "dial by name" features, however, and has not reached the level of sophistication required to integrate it with Web browsing on a cellular telephone. Mini keyboards and touch screens are being incorporated into some larger PDA style telephones, but they are not practical in the small lightweight designs demanded by most consumers. A trade-off or innovation eventually will lend itself to a solution with which almost everyone will be happy.

In the near term, producers may look forward to downloading and playing streaming video clips along with more built-in features and bells and whistles. Better coverage, enhanced connectivity, and future innovation will continue to make the cellular telephone an important tool in the producer's pocket. When properly used with enhanced calling features such as call forwarding, the producer truly will be able to turn his cellular telephone into a "sellphone."