

Cell phones doubling as tracking devices

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DALLAS — For a growing number of cell phone users, it's not just a question of "Can you hear me now?" It's also "Can you find me now?"

Increasingly, cell phones are gaining technology that lets customers track cell phone users' locations, helping them figure out where they are and where they're going, or where their employees or loved ones are roaming.

"For individuals, it's 'I want to locate my child. I'd like to find where they are after 10 p.m. I want to ping them,'" ABI Research analyst Kenneth Hyers said.

"Same thing for employers. They want to know who's the closest technician to route to a

location to help out. You have services like this that are really catching the imagination," he said. Hyers predicted that a lot of location-based services will come out in the next few years.

When Randy Curnutt of Bedford, Texas, began driving for SuperShuttle in 1989, dispatchers had to call each driver to find out where the vans were. The dispatchers plotted the vans by using magnets stuck to a metal map.

Today, the drivers simply turn on their Nextel cell phones. Using global positioning system technology in the phones, SuperShuttle can locate vans and direct them more efficiently to customers.

Drivers use the phone to process credit card payments and to tell the

dispatch office when they've started or ended work, when they're available to pick up another customer and where they are.

"The current system is a big improvement over the old system," Curnutt said.

Until recently, only Nextel Communications Inc. focused on cell phones that gave users the ability to track where the cell phones — and the people using them — were located.

But other cellular companies are jumping in, hoping to cash in on the desire of businesses and individuals to know the location of cell phone users.

Nextel has led the way by offering a variety of products, Hyers said. But Sprint Corp. recently joined the game with its "411" service that lets cell phone

users ask for directions, and he expects Verizon Wireless and Cingular Wireless to begin offering their own services by the end of the year.

However, a federal mandate requiring cell phones to automatically tell 911 centers where the caller is located has speeded adoption.

Nextel has had GPS technology in every phone since November 2002. Sprint and Verizon phones also contain GPS technology, allowing them to provide locator services if desired. For Sprint, the first toe in the water was Roadside Rescue, which includes the ability to call 411 to get directions or emergency help.

"It's on an option basis. But it's something that we think customers want," Sprint spokeswoman

Genevieve Billy said.

A strong backer of the Nextel technology is Dallas-based Business Courier Service Inc. The system lets drivers make deliveries faster and more efficiently, vice president Barry Stephenson said.

In fact, the company now touts its GPS ability when it calls on prospective customers.

"It's very comforting to customers to know where our drivers are," he said.

One initial concern for many employees is the idea of having the company always looking over their shoulders.

Mary Foltz, director of location solutions for Nextel, said she was "surprised and delighted" to hear of many cases where employees — initially concerned about having the system checking their location


— found that the technology protected them.


Nextel has expanded its offerings beyond businesses, now offering products that let consumers find their location and get turn-by-turn driving or walking directions, including a product that can help backpackers in wilderness areas.

"We were very surprised to see how popular these services have become with individual users," Foltz said.

Hyers of ABI Research said he expects location-based services to become much more popular in the coming years.


"I believe that LBS-enabled applications will be as ubiquitous in the mobile environment a decade from now as the Internet is for many of us today," he said.





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