

Push Afoot for Walkie-Talkies

Cell phone industry not sure most users will favor features

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Long used by soldiers and police, walkie-talkies have a no-nonsense aura that some cell phone operators want to transform into the warmer world of families and friends.

While certain blue-collar pursuits like construction and fleet operations have embraced the walkie-talkie function added to cell phones, moving beyond that niche has proven difficult, but carriers aren't giving up.



Clarity Communications Systems, Inc's Push-to-Talk servers surround Tom Carter (left), a vice president, and Jim Fuentes, chief executive. The software company, based in Aurora, has launched a walkie-talkie-like service for cell phone carriers.

Push-to-talk, as the industry calls cell phone walkie-talkie service, will be dressed up with new technology and features. But whether large numbers of cell phone users will be attracted is a question because of the abrupt nature of walkie-talkie conversations and their tendency to annoy people.

"It's a license to be rude," said Martin Dunsby, a senior vice president with Openwave Systems Inc., a San Diego-based wireless consultancy. "With a phone call you start by asking how someone is and some pleasantries. With push-to-talk, you jump straight in with what you want.

"It's more immediate communications, but only appropriate in certain circumstances."

While walkie-talkie conversations are fine for a trucker on the road or an electrician at a construction site, they're annoying in most indoor settings, such as an office or restaurant, Dunsby said.

Even so, non-traditional methods of communications are evolving beyond simple phone calls and text messages, he said, and some forms of push-to-talk may gain traction.

That's the goal of a small software company, Clarity Communications Systems Inc., which has launched its own form of push-to-talk out of its Aurora base for use by cell phone carriers. The new service is now offered by MiPhone, a Jamaica-based cell carrier, and several domestic carriers plan to launch their own versions of Clarity's push-to-talk.

Unlike traditional walkie-talkies that cover a limited distance, push-to-talk services would work wherever a carrier's network reaches.

The push-to-talk pioneer, Nextel Communications Inc., which is now part of Sprint Nextel Corp., dominates the field, focusing primarily on the blue-collar work market niche. A Jupiter Research survey found that only 6 percent of cell phone users said they had ever used push-to-talk, said Julie Ask, a senior analyst at Jupiter.

"The larger market is mostly untapped," she said.

Clarity is urging carriers to market push-to-talk for new uses, such as instant communications among teens and gamers. Sports enthusiasts watching games at different locations might use the function to razz one another when their team flubs a play, said Bill Jenkins, Clarity's vice president of product management.

"Some customers may not find much value [in walkie-talkie functions], but others may find it very valuable," Jenkins said.

It's the ease of reaching someone immediately that is the benefit and bane of the service. Whenever someone carries an activated phone, whether on the road or in a meeting, there is the possibility that a loud voice will suddenly shout out an instruction or ask a question.

To broaden push-to-talk's appeal, Clarity later this year will roll out location-based features that will let users know where their friends are located when they send them a walkie-talkie message. Their location will be identified on the phone's video screen.

This could be especially useful for public-safety workers, said Jim Fuentes, Clarity's chief executive, as a dispatcher could talk simultaneously to everyone in the vicinity of a gas pipe leak or a car hijacking.

"It's a function that traditional communications services don't have," Fuentes said.

The applications could also help parents keep track of their teen-agers, even sending alerts if a youngster drives the family car above a certain speed, he said.

It is unclear that such new wrinkles will attract consumers to a service they've previously ignored, said David Chamberlain, a telecom analyst with In-Stat.



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... of cell phone users said they had ever used push-to-talk, according to Jupiter Research survey. An Aurora-based company, Clarity Communication Systems, Inc., wants to change that. The company plans to:

Urge carriers to market push-to-talk for new users, like instant communications among teens or gamers.

Broaden appeal, by introducing features to let users know where callers are (left).

Try to move the concept beyond talk, to supplying a single button to launch cell phone data services.

"Push-to-talk in the past suffered from poor technical execution," Chamberlain said. "But it's hard to blame all its troubles on technical difficulties. Look at text messaging. It can be slow and hard to use, yet billions of messages are sent each month because it's something people really like and need.

"Nextel cracked the [push-to-talk] niche mostly with people who were already using walkie-talkies by giving them that function along with a cell phone."

One drawback to push-to-talk at the moment is that it only works when people have phones using the same carrier's network, said Jeff Kohler, director of wireless banking services at BathgateCapital Partners in Denver.

"It may be fine for a father to speak to his son, but you can't use it to talk to someone who uses a different carrier from yours," Kohler said. "And when you do use it, you're going to tick off anyone standing next to you because they not only hear you talk, but they hear the other side of the conversation.

"I don't see this as a big source of carrier revenue any time soon," Kohler said.

Besides enhancing push-to-talk with location information, Clarity plans to move the push-to concept beyond just talk. Many cell phone data services now go unused by most customers because the functions require too much effort to find, Jenkins said.

By supplying a single button to launch a service, Clarity hopes to change that, he said.

"For instance, you might have push-to-stocks where you push a button and say 'Verizon,' and the phone would give you the latest stock quote on Verizon Communications," Jenkins said. "Or you could have a single button to push to send a photo you took with your phone. We see this technology as a portal to simplify cell phone use."

It's an ambitious plan and one that several wireless software companies are pursuing, said Ken Hyers, an analyst with Technology Business Research Inc.

"I've used a similar service offered by Kodiak Networks," Hyers said. "It's good but not great. The next level is adding push-to-X features—push to send a photo, push to instant message, push to location. These are all good applications. The concept is good.

"But there are a lot of pitfalls. Carriers have tried it and failed. There's an opportunity here for somebody, maybe Clarity, to make it work."

Started in 1998 by seven engineers who took buyouts from Lucent Technologies Inc. and Motorola Inc., Clarity focused much of its efforts doing projects outsourced from Lucent and others, said Tom Carter, Clarity's global sales vice president.

The company, which has recruited experienced staff from other Chicago-area companies, now has more than 60 employees. Building upon Internet protocol technology and using the new high-speed data networks that cell phone carriers have built, Clarity hopes to build its Aurora base into a major hosting center for advanced applications.

"We have a lot of ideas in the pipeline," Carter said.