

Friends at Hand And In Your Face

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Josh Rosenthal is a regular user of Dodgeball, a service designed to help friends track each other on their mobile phones.

He tells the service where he happens to be -- at the Tryst coffee house, for example -- and a friend wandering nearby gets a text alert saying "Your friend Josh R. is @ Tryst," ostensibly so the friend can pop in to say hello. Rosenthal can also view the profiles of other Dodgeball users and a list of their recent hangout joints.

But what's supposed to facilitate his social life usually doesn't. "I tried to get people to sign up, but they say, 'Why would you want that?' " and so the 29-year-old Washingtonian has yet to broker a meeting through the service.

Taking one's social life and translating it for the phone has become one of the most hyped business concepts in recent months. Such services take advantage of the fact that most phones can track a user's location, as well as document events through cameras, video and text. Taken together, these technologies can be used to keep users abreast of their friends' thoughts and whereabouts in real time -- basically, turning the cellphone into a kind of social manager.

Mobile networking is commonplace in Japan. But in the United States, it's still an early-stage social experiment that's testing how much visibility and always-on access people want to give or receive.

At least a dozen companies bill their services as mobile social networks -- some simply reformat Web sites for the small screen, as Cingular Wireless has done since its recent deal with MySpace. Others, like Dodgeball, Loopt, Mologogo and WaveMarket, function more like a combination of messaging and mapping, allowing users to find, track and communicate with groups of their friends over their phone.

Over time, proponents of mobile networking say such functions could extend beyond reading people's profiles or coordinating party-hopping among friends. They might help parents keep track of children or employers locate their workers. Dodgeball, which was acquired by Google last year, is gaining traction among softball leagues and club promoters who use it to coordinate and publicize events. Some dating services send alerts to singles when they're near like-minded prospects.

But broad success of mobile social networking probably will depend on more than just signing up enough people to establish a community. The companies behind these services will need to find a balance within their features to avoid backlash from those who wish to stay under the radar sometimes or who don't want more complexity or visibility in their social lives.

Rosenthal, for example, said the service occasionally reminds him that's he's not actually emotionally close to some of the people he happens to be physically close to.

One of his college friends from a decade ago also lives in Washington, but they haven't seen each other since college. Yet because they've both signed up for Dodgeball, they get occasional text message alerts

about each other. "We'll be within blocks of each other in Adams Morgan," Rosenthal said, "but it's not like I'm going to leave my friends to go hang out."

On the flip side, Rosenthal has had to create distance with some friends by eliminating them from his Dodgeball network. He recently deleted one of his best friends from his mobile social network after that friend reverted to a hard-partying, dangerous lifestyle that Rosenthal didn't want to support. "I just no longer wanted to be associated with him," he said. Thus, their cellphones divorced as well.

There are online discussions devoted to this new frontier of etiquette. Is it appropriate to use the service to broadcast a message saying you're bored at work? What about the "vanity check-in," when users brag about getting into the new exclusive nightclub? And then there are the uncomfortable mishaps that occur when someone breezes in and out of town and inadvertently notifies his entire circle of friends that he's avoided them.

Dodgeball, for example, has a locator function that allows users to text-message their locations to the network, which in turn alerts their nearby friends. But that function can create a security risk, which is why some companies -- such as AirG Wireless -- have omitted it.

For someone like Melissa Maldonado, 23, who has never used MySpace or Friendster to talk to or make friends online, the lack of a locator function hasn't made AirG a lesser service.

"A lot of my friends are there," said Maldonado, a florist who occasionally recognizes customers based on their AirG profiles. It's how she stays in touch with her brother and several cousins, who are also members. She even learned about a Ciara concert in her hometown of Allentown, Pa., through her network of AirG friends.

In many ways, social networking is all about the personal profile. But because some members often reveal their lifestyles in those profiles, AirG didn't want to leave them vulnerable to stalking or gay-bashing, said Frederick Ghahramani, co-founder of Vancouver, B.C.-based AirG.

For people like Neil Schroeder, the broader issue of being able to control his accessibility is still important. While the District resident uses MySpace on his Cingular phone to post where he is, he doesn't necessarily want his phone to communicate that on his behalf. "If people don't know where I am, it's because I don't want them to know."

Companies are studying such social issues intently as they figure out what works best.

Yahoo, for example, has been researching early feedback from its trial of a service called Mixd, launched on five college campuses last month. Mixd, a free downloadable service, allows users to set up groups of friends who can share text messages, pictures and videos with one another -- like sending a mass e-mail. Eventually, it may add location services to the mix as well.

"The social behavior mirrors real life," said Michael Quoc, senior product manager of Mixd. Users sometimes freeze people out of their Mixd clique, for example, or invite them in and establish a separate group that doesn't include them. Some groups are extremely chatty, prompting some members to put the conversation on mute, meaning the messages get sent to a Web inbox instead. "Etiquette becomes very important because the device is always with you. It can be very intrusive."