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business

## Cellphones put chat rooms in palm of hand

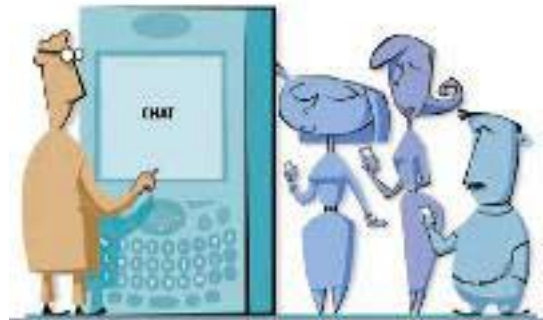
By Kimberly S. Johnson

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While people have been using their cellphones to send text messages to friends and relatives for years, technology companies and carriers are expanding this ability to unite people with friends and strangers.

Chat rooms, once a bastion of the personal computer, have exploded onto cellphones.

"Over the last 18 months, mobile services have been popping up everywhere," said Daniel Newman, founder and chief executive of ID345, a Denver-based developer of mobile applications.



Instead of sending text or e-mail messages to friends via cellphone, mobile chat rooms let users interact with people of similar interests, for example snowboarding or local bands. It's different from sending a text message to someone you know, as messages in chat rooms appear on the cellphones of all users in that particular room.

Companies that offer mobile chat services include AirG, PowerChat and Upoc. Upoc uses text messaging to blast messages to others that have joined a chat room about a particular topic, such as NBA basketball.

Examples of messages sent to Upoc users in the NBA chat room Monday include, "Anyone hear about Jason Kidd to Lakers trade rumors?" "Nuggets giving up Boykins and Miller has to be the dumbest move, now AI is hurt."

According to a recent survey, 36,000 people in the Denver area logged into an AirG chat room during a single week in January.

AirG is a Vancouver, British Columbia-based designer and developer of mobile chat rooms.

Users spend an average 59 minutes each day chatting - on and off - on the AirG network, said Fred Ghahramani, founder and chief executive of AirG. More than 70 percent of the company's chatters are between the ages of 18 and 29.

"A large number of those people are in the service industry or students who don't sit in front of a PC all day," Ghahramani said. "It may not be OK to talk on the phone while at work, but it's totally acceptable to text into a phone."

When entering a chat room developed by AirG, users can create a profile, which can include a photo.

After locating friends or making new ones through the service, users instant message each other privately, or join a number of interest-based "lounges" to chat with multiple users about various subjects. Examples of lounges include

“West Coast,” “Hip-Hop” and “Singles 30,” for singles over age 30.

AirG was founded six years ago, long before data connections were standard on cellphones.

“It took us five years to get 5 million users, and eight months to get from 5 million to 10 million users,” Ghahramani said.

Popular online-based social networking sites that let users blog and upload photos, videos and music now offer the functionality to let users keep in touch with their online communities while on the go. MySpace is a prime example, along with Flickr, a photo-sharing website. Flickr lets users snap photos with a camera phone and immediately send the photo to a blog.

Some services, such as one offered by Broomfield-based Useful Networks, incorporate GPS technology to alert users to where their friends are through a mapping program that is easily accessed from a cellphone. AT&T, Verizon and T-Mobile said they are looking into providing location-based mobile phone services.

Currently, Dodgeball is a service that has a similar offering but relies on users to send a text message to alert others to their location.

AT&T, formerly Cingular, recently introduced a partnership with social networking giant MySpace.com to allow users to seamlessly view and upload information to pages from their phones.

“It’s real important to us because we’ve been building more capabilities over the last few years,” said Jennifer Bowcock, director for consumer media relations for AT&T. “We want to take the chat experience from the PC to the wireless phone.”

For the cellphone service providers, mobile social networking is a way to capitalize on new data capabilities, as revenues from voice calls shrink, said Joe Laszlo, senior analyst for JupiterResearch. He said that it’s key for carriers to partner with other companies like MySpace that provide a built-in base of users.

AirG has partnered with 85 mobile phone providers worldwide. Different names are used for chat tools provided by AirG. AT&T offers the service under the name Cool Talk. It’s called The Lounges on Sprint Nextel, Hot Talk on T-Mobile and Friendz on Verizon.

The U.S. is the fastest-growing market for AirG, tallying 64 percent of the company’s users, because text messaging and Internet service plans for cellphones are cheaper here than other countries, Ghahramani said.

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