

BRANDWEEK

Spanish-speaking Cell Phone Users Get Mobile Networking

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August 23, 2006

NEW YORK -- Starting next week, mobile phone users across the country will be able to hook up to a Spanish language mobile social networking site, Conexion Latina.

The venture is the brainchild of Vancouver software company AirG and will be available through partnerships with all the major U.S. cell phone networks, including Sprint Nextel, T Mobile and Verizon, said Air G founder and director, Frederick Ghahramani.

The service, which is known by different names depending on which cell phone network the user belongs to, will enable subscribers to instant message, blog, and share photographs, all from a cell phone, and all in Spanish.

The one million self-identified Spanish speaking subscribers are the fastest growing segment of AirG's 10 million users, Ghahramani said last week, but added that the overall mobile network communities are experiencing strong growth.

"In the past eight months, we've moved from 5 to 10 million subscribers," Ghahramani said. He attributed that growth to improvements in cell phone design that makes them easier to use. Newer handsets, colored displays and better service all combine to make the experience "look and feel a lot more analogous to what you can do online."

From a marketing perspective, Ghahramani said that the company's service is an opportunity to reach a valuable demographic.

"Randomly spamming users doesn't make sense," Ghahramani said. "[We get] almost 2 billion impressions a month. We bring to the advertisers the customer identity to really target that customer effectively."

AirG has attracted the attention of a host of brand-name companies, according to Allison Webb, marketing communications manager. Schick, Dunkin Donuts, American Express, and Mercedes are among the companies that have paid for banner ads on the AirG application.

Webb called banner ads a "more traditional form of mobile marketing," and said that the company is now aiming for a more sophisticated approach.

"We want to create branded communities," Webb said, in which subscribers would get texts advertising promotions and special deals from the company partnering with AirG.

"You're getting access to something that the general public doesn't have," she said. "It's not sending out pure promotions, it's relationship building."

Michael Gartenberg, vp and research director at New York's Jupiter Research, said that the growth of mobile networking communities is a "natural progression" to the cell phone from the computer.

“For the younger demographic typing messages on their phone keypad is as natural as an older demographic typing on a keyboard,” he said. Today’s 18- to- 24- year- olds, he said, “have a greater affinity towards this type of interaction on the phone.”

For Ghahramani, its not just the younger demographic that is signing up for mobile networking.

“The people who power America don’t sit in front of a computer,” he said. “The Starbucks employee, the taxi driver, hair salon [worker], they don’t spend the day behind a PC.”

For those people, the cell phone is increasingly where they connect with friends and advertisers. “Its kind of a PC replacement,” he said.

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