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Socializing via smart phone

Vancouver company enables mobile communities

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Cyber-stroll into one of AirG's virtual wireless lounges and you'll join a community that is growing at a rate of 27,000 people a day, making it the largest and fastest-growing mobile community in the world, according to the Vancouver company.

You'll need your cellphone to join, and you have to be a subscriber to one of 85 wireless providers who are AirG customers around the world. But once in, you'll be part of a network that has signed on seven million users worldwide, and is growing fast.

It's AirG's answer to the growing phenomenon of online social networking where people get together with friends -- and strangers -- to share conversations, make dates, talk about themselves and show off photos.

Social networking is becoming so ubiquitous on the Internet that even dogs have their own sharing site, www.dogster.com, where petowners blog and share stories about their favourite kibble.

On PCs, social networking is expanding through such sites as myspace.com and friendster.com. But AirG is focusing purely on the mobile market, offering the same types of community services users get on their PCs, delivered to the web-enabled cellphone screen.

These members are people who are not at computers all day but want to participate in the world of online communities, said AirG director Frederick Ghahramani.

"Our domain is mobile and we are the largest mobile social network," he said. "Our network is different from the online guys.

"The mobile user is the taxi driver, or the hairdresser who works in a salon. The same way you and I might have MSN messaging on and chat with a friend during work, people are doing this on their mobile phones."

The last quarter saw 2.5 million new users join AirG wireless communities, which are marketed as a value-added service by mobile phone providers. AirG focuses on the mobile market, with a range of services from multiplayer games to online communities.

"We have grown like a weed in the last quarter, and we are continuing to do so today," said Ghahramani. "We consistently place on top of the entertainment, messaging network, and in some cases we are driving 20 to 30 per cent of the value-added services revenue on the entire network."

AirG's online communities are available through Canadian providers such as Bell Mobility with its Blue Lounge, Rogers, and Telus Mobility, but its biggest customers are in the United States, where Sprint and Nextel, Boost Mobile, T-Mobile, and Verizon have signed on, some taking the AirG service and rebranding it under their own name and logo. AirG has its communities on 85 wireless providers worldwide.

Ghahramani said his company plans to roll out at least 10 new micro-communities during the next fiscal quarter, expanding features that include such elements as chat, instant messaging, and sharing profiles.

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